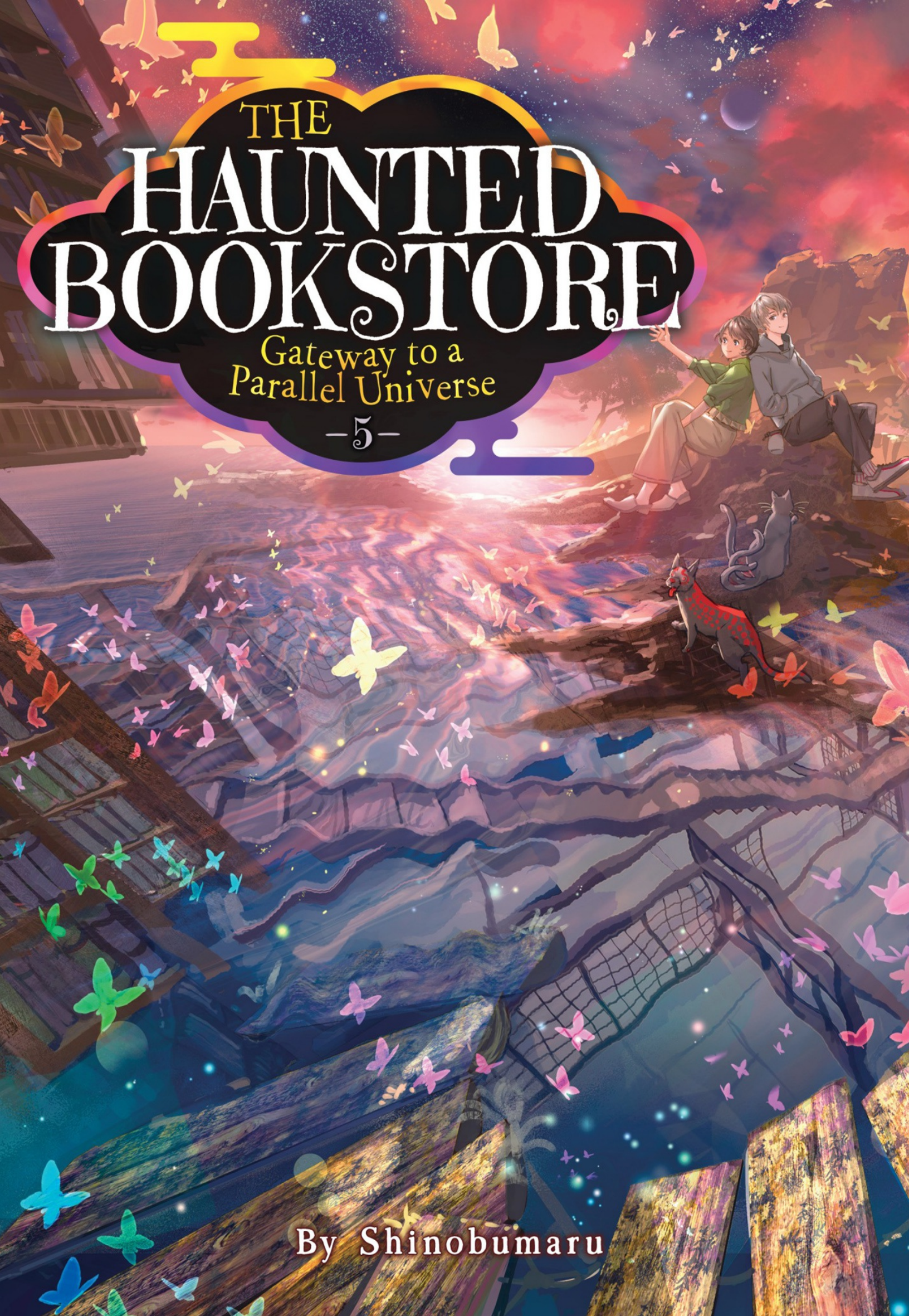




# THE HAUNTED BOOKSTORE

Gateway to a  
Parallel Universe

—5—

By Shinobumaru





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Wagaya wa Kakuriyo no kashihonya san Novel 5

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VOLUME 5

Confessions of the Morning Moon  
and Suspicious Secrets

WRITTEN BY

Shinobumaru

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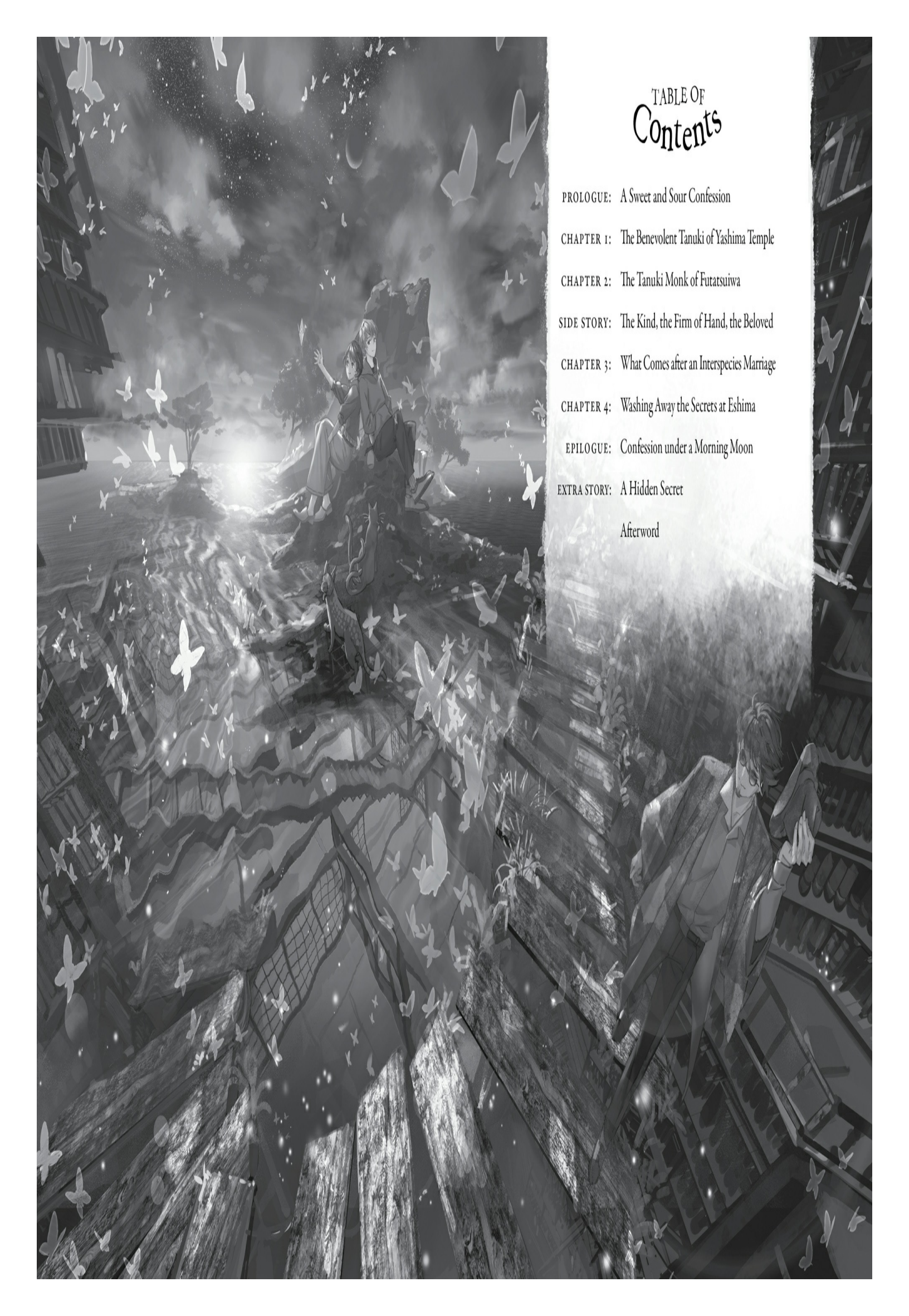
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## Prologue:

### A Sweet and Sour Confession

**P**ITTER, PATTER, *pitter, patter*.

The windows rumbled as the rain lashed against them.

The sky above was blanketed in thick clouds, and the world of spirits, which had never seen sunlight, was as dark as it had always been—perhaps, darker still. The only light came from the glimmerflies that dimly illuminated the room with their unreliable flickering.

The old living room of the bookstore, which connected the store itself with Shinonome-san's personal quarters, always smelled of books and ink. However, it was filled with a different scent today—the acidic scent of fruit.

Of ripe plums, to be exact.

It was, after all, the beginning of summer and the perfect time for plums. It was the season to soak the ripest ones in alcohol or sink them in sugar and turn them into delicious syrups. However, right now I was attempting to pickle them into umeboshi—traditional picked plums, perfect on rice.

Shinonome-san loved hand-pickled umeboshi, especially when made with more salt than the kind typically sold on the market. I made them this way every year because I loved seeing him smile when he dug into the little pickled things. And if I wanted to make enough to last the entire year, I had to go through a sizable batch of plums. One by one, I carefully removed the stems from the fruits with a bamboo skewer. It could be a lot of work, but because I'd done it year after year, I already instinctually and thoroughly knew the motions required. I could usually go through the entire lot without much thought, but—

“Ow...!”

I accidentally stabbed my finger with the skewer and let out a small yelp. A tiny, red dot of blood formed at the spot of my sudden injury. When I saw it, I panicked and stuck the wound into my mouth, and the strange taste of my own

blood made my mood immediately plummet.

*Get a hold of yourself, Kaori! Why can't you concentrate on such a simple task?!* I chastised myself.

*"...I love you!"*

For a short moment, the words that I'd uttered that day flashed through my mind.

"Urgh..."

The skewer dropped out of my slack hand, and I flopped over onto the floor.

Summer had just begun, and here I was, once again tormented by my anguish with only the unrelenting rain and sticky, unyielding humidity for company.

The roots of this anguish could be traced to what had happened at the end of spring.

*"Soon, we exorcists will have our paradise back!"*

*"I can change this world! I'll send it back to the era when humans lived in fear of the darkness and exorcists wielded their power freely!"*

Suimei's father, Shirai Seigen, had wreaked havoc that swept through the entire spirit realm. We had pulled through it somehow, with a good deal of effort. To say that the damage brought upon the realm had been extraordinary was a total understatement. Countless spirits had been hurt and come away from the event with terrible grief. I, myself, had sustained a grave injury. My wound had since healed, but a scar remained in its place.

And while Seigen-san and Suimei still weren't on the best of terms, they at least didn't hate each other—or so I'd heard. Also, Seigen-san was currently recuperating under the care of Mount Kurama's Sojobo with his Inugami, Akamadara, in tow.

However, amidst the mayhem, I had made an even *bigger* mess of things.

It had all started when I was facing off against Seigen-san and blurted out the thought I had in my mind.

*"I'm sorry, but the one I want to be with is Suimei. He's the one I love, so*

*please, don't hurt him anymore."*

Not only had that been a blatant confession, but on top of that, I had laid my feelings bare right before the person for whom I had said feelings for. The wave I'd been riding had been too strong to stop, and my emotions crashed straight into him. I really did think that it had come out just because I was in the heat of the moment, though.

I swear—honestly!

I'd spewed out the feelings that were bubbling over within me without thought for the consequences. Now that I thought about it, I might have broken out in a cold sweat too. If my confession had been rejected, I probably would have dropped dead from the awkwardness right then and there. My only saving grace was that Suimei hadn't reacted badly.

When I recalled the way his words started to fail him as his face flushed bright red, my own heart began to squeeze unbearably tight in my chest. The feelings overwhelming me now had nowhere to go. I hadn't seen Suimei since that day, and it had already been two weeks since the end of that awful mess Seigen-san created, which meant that for those two weeks, my confession had also gone unanswered.

*Urgh...* If I hadn't fallen unconscious, I probably wouldn't be panicking as much right now.

After the incident, my health had practically disintegrated. I had worked pretty hard while my injuries were still healing, after all. When I had come to, Suimei had already packed his belongings, left the bookstore, and returned to the apothecary. By the time I had made a full recovery, he had left his father in the care of Mount Kurama's Sojobo and set off for the human world.

Which means, we had just missed each other. Talk about bad timing. How long would I have to wait to know how Suimei felt about me...?

*If I had a phone, I could call him right away and ask.* But, unfortunately, there were no cell towers or telephone lines in the spirit world. If I wanted to know how he felt, I would have to see him myself, or...

I snuck a glance at the window and the rain pouring outside of it.

*Patter, patter. Patter, patter.* All I could see was the glass shaking from the force of the raindrops and nothing else.

“Pfft, ha ha ha. Oh, letters can be so dreadfully slow, can’t they?” said a voice that rang clear and sweet as a bell.

I shot up at the sound. Clearly, whoever was speaking was deriving a great deal of joy from my seemingly fruitless plight. I squinted and could faintly make out the silhouette of a figure sitting by the window, laughing merrily.

“However, would you not agree that waiting for a reply through the post is part of the fun?” the voice continued.

“C’mon, I’m dying over here...” I grumbled.

“Oh, you precious thing. Such a sweet and *shy* girl! You were like a newborn babe only a little while ago, and now look at how love has transformed you! The effect love has on humans is truly intriguing. Pfft, ha ha ha!”

“Jeez, stop teasing me already. This is really important to me, you know!”

However, my protests only served to further entertain Fuguruma-youbi. She chuckled.

Fuguruma-youbi was a spirit manifested from the emotions poured into love letters. She had snow-white hair that fell in a smooth sheet, soft as the finest silk, and skin so pale it seemed almost translucent. She wore a long, two-layered uchikake robe, red as the sunset haze. The tips of her lips and eyes were also colored with red makeup, and her irises were a pale lilac. As pale as they were, they stood out like a glowing fire amidst the white of her skin and hair. She carried an enchanting allure that could strike down anyone’s heart.

Her legs were weak, however, and so she used her arms to crawl toward me. Once she had settled beside me, she traced a finger up and down my thigh and whispered in her vibrant voice, “Oh, poor Kaori, so impatient! But who can blame you, when your writings of fierce, hot, burning love to Suimei are still without a reply?”

“I-I didn’t send him fierce, hot, burning *anything*! It was just a normal letter, I swear!”



“I can tell you’re lying, my dear. No doubt, within its pages lie wishes of reunion and want of his warmth, etched in your very hand! Now, tell me everything that you wrote in that letter. And slowly! I have *all* day.”

“But, um, I mean—”

I could feel myself unraveling from Fuguruma-youbi’s teasing, but I also didn’t want to lie to her. I felt like I was being wrenched in two directions.

You see, a few days ago, while I was mulling over this problem, Fuguruma-youbi had suggested writing a letter.

“If you can’t see him, then just write to him, easy as that,” she said. “Love is epistolary by nature. Some may deride the practice of penning a letter as old-fashioned, but humans have let ink and paper carry their feelings since times of yore—just think of the Heian period. It was a reliable way for two parties to convey their thoughts, even when they couldn’t see each other.”

*If my sentiments could be read clearly and completely from what I pen, I thought, then why not?*

What Fuguruma-youbi said to me sounded convincing enough, so I took her advice and wrote a letter to Suimei, spirit realm-style.

All you needed for a spirit realm-style letter was to write it on paper made from a tree spirit known as a Jubokko. They grew by absorbing the blood of those who had fallen on battlefields, and if you used paper created from their bark, you could write a letter that would send itself. Once you finished writing the letter, you would simply fold it into a crane, and it would fly itself to its recipient.

I think Shinonome-san had told me once about how this came to be, because the regrets of those who fell in battle were so strong—it was the regret of dying before they could send their final thoughts to the ones they loved.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m a first-time lover. I couldn’t make up fierce, hot, burning anything even if I tried!” I huffed. I felt a little sorry for Fuguruma-youbi now that her hopes were so high, but oh well.

“Aw, and that’s the truth? How very sad. Now hurry up and gain some more experience so you can share more of your bittersweet love with me!” she

wailed.

“Jeez, so my love is just a bit of fun entertainment for you, huh?” I sighed.

If I considered my relationship with Suimei from Fuguruma-youbi’s point of view, I supposed I could see how it made for a great source of amusement. Now that she was visiting me more frequently, I felt a little conflicted.

“All right, that’s enough love talk for the day!” I decided. I couldn’t let her tease me forever, after all. That wouldn’t be good for me. I ended the conversation and took the bamboo skewer into my hand once more, returning to my mountain of plums.

“I don’t know when I’ll get a reply anyway, so there’s no use sitting around waiting for it. Youbi, come help me with my plums!”

She sighed wistfully. “Now, you know I’ve never held anything heavier than a single chopstick in my life.”

I raised a suspicious eyebrow. “You’re kidding.”

“I am not!” she insisted.

“Jeez...!”

“Pfft, ha ha ha! Oh, Kaori, you really make it too easy,” Fuguruma-youbi giggled.

All I could do was sigh in dismay and reach for another ripe plum. However, before my hand could even touch one, the sliding door connecting the bookstore to the living room clattered open and out peeked Noname. She was the spirit whom I saw as my mother figure.

“Good grief. I’ve had enough of all this rain!” she exclaimed, sweeping her dark green hair up into a bundle. Her gaze passed over the mountain of plums in the room, and her eyes twinkled.

“Oh my, is it that time of year already? I’ll help,” she said.

My shoulders sagged, and I sighed with genuine relief. “Thank you, Noname. The pile just goes on forever and ever!”

Noname closed her third eye and reached a cheerful hand into her handbag,

fishing out something small. “Here, Kaori. This came for you today.”

“What...?” My heart leaped in my chest. *No... No way, no way, no way!*

Noname extended to me what she had produced from her handbag—a small origami crane. It flapped its little wings and left her palm, circled around the ceiling, and landed softly in mine.

“It got stuck in the window by the front door. Have a look and see what it says,” she said.

“Y-yeah, I will,” I nodded anxiously.

The reply I had wanted so badly was finally here. My fingers couldn’t stop trembling as I carefully unfolded the crane that had been meticulously constructed by Suimei. But of course it had been—he was the kind of person who was attentive to small details. I scanned the writing as my heart drummed on nervously.

“So, what does it say?” Fuguruma-youbi asked, her eyes sparkling and her smile tugging wide.

My eyes whipped up to meet hers, maybe a little more forcefully than I had intended, and my voice shook with excitement as I spoke. “Suimei said he really liked the Koizumi Yakumo books I lent him! The *Kwaidan* and *Kidan* ones!”

“Kaori, you fool. There are more pressing things at hand—or have you forgotten?” Fuguruma-youbi wrinkled her nose in disappointment and swiped the letter from me.

“H-hey! Give that back!” I cried. I shot out a desperate hand, but the spirit dodged with ease.

Fuguruma-youbi’s eyes darted back and forth as she ran them down the page, and finally, a knowing smile drifted across her lips. “It says, ‘In three days, I will return to the spirit realm. I have matters I would like to discuss with you, so please leave some time free in your schedule’!”

“W-what...?!” I gasped. I could feel my face flare up, like a match tossed into kindling. The thumping of my heart rang in my ears, and all of a sudden, I felt like I had been plunged into a sea of sickly sweet syrup. It was all too much to

bear.

“N-Noname!” I threw my arms around the spirit and squeezed her tightly, trying to reign in my emotions. “H-he said he’s gonna be here in three days! What do I do? What do I do?!”

“Oh my,” Noname giggled and softly stroked my hair. “What happened?”

“I... I told him how I felt about him. I think he’s g-going to tell me how he feels about me...!” I stammered.

Noname’s face lit up like a thousand glimmerflies. She smiled, the corners of her amber eyes creasing gently. “Kaori, you’ve grown so much!”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” I mumbled.

“It has everything to do with everything!” Noname exclaimed. “It felt as if you were only a little girl yesterday, and now here you are, falling in love and letting the boy you love know how you feel! If you walk away from this with a boyfriend, we might even be seeing you in a wedding dress soon!”

“A w-wedding dress?!” I spluttered. “It’s a bit too soon to even think about that! Right? Right?!”

Noname chuckled. “Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry, I got a little carried away imagining us all as one big, happy family...”

A few tears began to form in her eyes. She sniffed and delicately dabbed at them with a handkerchief.

“Well, we have to make sure you’re nice and dolled up for the meeting, no? What do you say to a slight trim and some new summer clothes? We could get you a pair of cute sandals, and I could do your makeup too. You can also borrow some of my accessories!”

“Wow... Are you sure?” I asked.

“Of course. This day is very important to you, and I would do anything for you, my daughter. Everything must be perfect!” she declared.

“Thank you, Noname. That makes me so happy to hear. I’m lucky to have a mom like you,” I said.

“No, thank *you*, Kaori. Thank you for letting me be part of such a special time in your life... Becoming family with you has been one of the best things to ever happen to me,” she smiled.

We giggled, and I looked into Noname’s amber eyes. They were still glinting with tears, shining like the comforting rays of the sun in the glimmerfly light.

“Let’s make your special day a grand one, shall we?” she said.

“Yeah!” I nodded.

Noname petted my head again.

*...Oh, just how was Suimei going to reply to my confession?!*

This was all new to me. My mind couldn’t settle down and kept running through scenarios of what would happen if it went well—or badly. Excitement and nervousness seesawed back and forth in my head.

“It’s going to be okay. I’ve got your back as family, Kaori,” Noname said.

Yeah. Things were going to be fine, especially with Noname by my side. I let myself sink into her warmth and took a deep breath. The usual notes of ink and old books were there, mixed with the tanginess of the plums.

It was the sour-sweet scent that marked the beginning of summer.

*If love has a scent, this would be it,* I thought.



## Chapter 1:

# The Benevolent Tanuki of Yashima Temple

“U<sub>M</sub>... How do I look?” I asked.

Noname nodded. “Perfect. You really are the cutest girl in the entire spirit realm today, Kaori.”

I giggled nervously. “Aw, well, I don’t know about the *entire* spirit realm...”

The skies tonight were clear as could be, so clear that the buckets of rain that had been pouring down earlier were a mere memory. The night was tinged green, like a refreshing glass of melon soda. It was still dark as ever with no sun in sight, and the warm winds wafted from house to house with the glimmerflies riding joyfully on the air.

Summer was finally here, and soon I would be meeting with Suimei too. I was wearing a new dress that had been specially made for this day, and Noname had gone over my face with a light layer of makeup. Now, I was squinting into the mirror like I was locked in a staring contest with myself.

“Does my hair look weird or anything? It’s fine, right?” I said with a sigh.

A lone black cat looked back at me as I checked myself in the full-length mirror.

“Your hair is fine, but there’s something off about you. Is it mating season or something? Your head’s gotten awfully big,” she said.

“Wh...?! C’mon, Nyaa-san!” I cried out without thinking. Nyaa-san, the Kasha spirit who was my best friend, only yawned in response.

“You humans and your weird dating customs,” she grumbled.

“Well, we’re certainly different from cats, that’s for sure,” I said. “Couldn’t you at least offer me a few words of encouragement?”

“I’ll give you some pity when you get dumped. Good luck, Kaori!”

“Why are you so sure that I’m gonna get dumped?! I know you’re only

kidding, but that's still a bit much..."

I sounded more deflated and defeated than usual, but Nyaa-san only offered a breathy sigh in return.

"I just don't understand why you're so worried about this, Kaori," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, if you don't get it, you don't get it. I wouldn't want to speak out of turn, after all," Nyaa-san said.

"C'mon, can't you break it down for me?" I pleaded. I had no idea what my best friend was getting at. Seriously!

Hearing my despondent voice, Nyaa-san waved her three tails about and smiled. Her multi-colored eyes thinned into cheerful arcs. "You can be so silly sometimes, you know. Don't worry if you get dumped, 'cause if you do, you can just find the mermaid butcher to grant your wish."

"Mermaid...?" I tilted my head, perplexed. Then, Noname, who had been packing away the makeup, slid in.

"Oh, I think I remember hearing about that recently! Apparently, there's this butcher who sells mermaid meat, and they can grant you any wish you want," she said. "They're apparently summoned by the jingle of a bell, so merchants have been going around selling bell accessories. They're quite the entrepreneurs."

Noname and Nyaa-san continued to discuss the mysterious butcher with excitement, but I furrowed my brow instead.

"It's very impressive if they can really grant any wish, I'll give them that," I said. Then I thought about the people I knew who had eaten mermaid meat. There was Yao Bikuni, who unknowingly consumed some that her father had brought home. She had so much love to give, but as fate would have it, the eternal life she received caused her to outlive all her loved ones, which deeply saddened her.

The other person was Seigen-san, who ate mermaid meat in an attempt to gain power that was too great for him to contain. Because of that power, his

innards started to rot and he was subjected to excruciating pain. If Seigen-san had not consumed that mermaid meat, the disaster that he wrought upon the spirit realm might never have come to pass.

“There’s no going back once you’ve eaten mermaid meat, right? You’d have to be extremely well prepared for the consequences...” My thoughts accidentally slipped from my lips. Nyaa-san and Noname looked at each other and laughed.

“I completely agree. You should use your own powers to make your wishes come true, and the same goes for love. That’s why we’re dressing you up to look so beautiful today!” Noname said.

“Yeah, Kaori, go and make Suimei your man!” Nyaa-san chimed in.

“M-my *man*?! Jeez, c’mon now, Nyaa-san!” I stammered. *Couldn’t you have said that any other way?!*

Nyaa-san watched as I protested with a tomato-red face. She batted her eyes at me.

“I’m not the smartest cat in the world, but even I know that you look positively adorable today, Kaori. I mean, you are Akiho’s daughter and all. There’s nothing you need to worry about. Go get ‘em!” she cheered.

“Oh...!” I grinned and nodded. It was nice to hear such kind words from a good friend. “Thank you, Nyaa-san. I love you!”

At my words, Nyaa-san turned and meowed.

As I jogged along the unpaved paths of the spirit realm, a few spirits peeked out from their establishments.

“Hey, Kaori! Got some great fresh fish from today’s catch! How about it? Want some?”

“Sorry, I’m in a bit of a rush! I’ll come some other time!” I yelled back.

“Daughter of Marebito! Pay us a visit once the sun sets. We have some new products, and we’d love for you to taste them!” another spirit shouted.

“Wow, thank you! I’ll be there for sure! Count on it!” I replied.

More and more spirits called out to me as I hurried along the main road. I giggled to myself as I replied to each of them in turn. The same thing had happened on the day I met Suimei too. I never could have imagined that just by picking up his unconscious body from the side of the road that my life would be turned topsy-turvy like this.

I watched as the glimmerflies bobbed gently beside me, and I wove my way through the crowded road until I was able to leave it. I would be able to see my house very soon. And as that thought entered my head, I spotted something else.

“Oh!” I held my breath and stopped still. I could see a bright crowd of glimmerflies in the distance. Glimmerflies were attracted to humans, and the only humans who lived in the spirit realm now were me...and Suimei.

Once the realization hit me, I could feel my cheeks turn hot. Now I could see him walking toward me. He was flanked by two raven Tengu—Kinme and Ginme—and walking by his feet was his Inugami, Kuro. They seemed to be deep in conversation, chatting happily with each other.

And then something in Suimei’s face changed. He had seen me too.

His steps faltered, and his face glowed with a gentle smile.

*Oh. My. Gooooooooood.*

He looked so cute! How could he do this to me, when he never, ever showed much expression?!

I could feel my palms growing sweaty and my heartbeat racing. *What do I do? No, seriously, what do I do?!*

Suimei had drawn closer to me while I was busy panicking.

I gulped and slowly began to take a few timid steps toward him as well.

*Shfff. Shfff.* The gravel beneath my shoes crunched lightly with each step I took. We were technically off the main road, but it was still close enough that we could hear it. In fact, for one reason or another, it was the only thing I could focus on right now.

*Just a little more*, I thought. My heart felt like it could explode at any moment, especially now that Suimei's light brown eyes had met my own.

We were both right in front of the bookstore now, close enough that if either of us spoke, our words would...

*"Whooooooooooooooooaaaaaaa!!!"*

A deafening shout ripped through the air, and Shinonome-san came tumbling and fumbling out of the bookstore.

"Stop! Stop! You've gotta be kidding me!" the noise continued.

*"Tch! Shinonome, do something!"*

Following Shinonome-san was Tamaki-san, the story-seller.

"Easier said than done—wait, Kaori?! Curses, look at the time!" Shinonome-san screeched. His face had become distorted with panic, and he stood in a way that looked like he was trying to protect me from something.

"What? What's going on?!" I gasped and tried to peek into the bookstore behind the spirit.

What I saw sent my jaw crashing to the ground.

"Shinonomeeeeeeeee!!! You're not getting away with this!" someone shouted, and suddenly an avalanche of tan-colored beasts came flooding out from the aging door of the bookstore!

They were foxes, yelping and fussing and pouring out all over the path. Before long, they began to merge together into a thick cloud of white smoke, which in turn transformed...into a man who looked about the same age as Shinonome-san.

"You have disappointed me severely. I didn't take you for a coward. Or did you run because you're fully aware of the *sin* you have committed?!" he yelled. The man's clothes were immediately recognizable as those of a Buddhist priest, with a head wrap and black robes. A dull, light green kasaya robe was draped over one shoulder, and the corners of his eyes were tinted red. His thin eyes were sharp and piercing—one glare from them sent chills running throughout my body.

However, the most notable of all his features were the four tails that emerged from his black robes. They were a stunning white, flared with a distinct intent to intimidate.

“I wasn’t trying to run! I just don’t like being surrounded by *beasts*! Calm down now, Hakuzosu!”

*Hakuzosu...?*

The name rang a bell. Hakuzosu was a very famous fox yokai who turned himself into a priest to stop foxes from being killed and skinned. I remembered that he and Shinonome-san went way back; in fact, they would often hang out at Yamanashi Prefecture, where Hakuzosu lived.

Shinonome-san desperately wiped off the sweat that was beading on his forehead and forced a wobbly smile.

“Y-yes, well, I get what you are trying to say. Perhaps my books did play a part in it, but I can’t be made responsible for everything, can I?” he said.

Hakuzosu’s face remained dark and cloudy, and he pointed a forceful finger at Shinonome-san.

“You can’t talk your way out of this. You must deal with it appropriately, and that includes providing compensation!” he thundered.

“What? Compensation?!” Shinonome-san was clearly rattled by these words, and his eyes darted around frantically. Just then, two young women emerged from the bookstore.

“Father! Enough, please! This has nothing to do with the bookstore!” one of them pleaded. She was a girl with long straight hair, wearing a dazzling, white dress. Her beautiful eyes were like a breath of fresh air, and she had a snaggletooth that transformed her beauty into cuteness. On top of her head sat a large pair of fox ears. The one on the right seemed to have a piece missing: She wore a purple satin ribbon on that spot.

“G-go on, Konoha... You can do it,” said the other girl. She wore a dark, gothic kimono adorned with a bold, flowery pattern. Her blouse was lacy, and her arms were partially covered by a pair of short black gloves. A wide-brimmed hat shaded her face, almost obscuring the trendy colored glasses she wore. She



clearly enjoyed wearing traditional Japanese clothing with a modern twist. She hid her face with the fluffy tail that sprang from behind her. Immediately, I could tell that she was a tanuki—a raccoon dog—who had transformed.

“But, Konoha...!” Hakuzosu began.

Konoha—the woman with the fox ears—had tears in her light gray eyes. She turned to the older fox.

“Father, you always cause so much trouble for everyone! I’m ashamed of you, really!” she huffed.

“But none of this would have happened if you hadn’t borrowed those books from this store!” he retorted.

“I’ve told you over and over, this store has nothing to do with it! I will admit, what I read did give me some ideas that I’d never thought about before, but they weren’t the only reason for what happened. You stubborn fool...! You numbskull...!” she sniffed. “I *hate* you, Father!”

“Wait, Konoha, you can’t just say that! You’re going to make your poor ol’ dad cry, you know!” Hakuzosu sulked. There was not a single trace of his earlier anger to be found, only pitiful sadness, and all the color had drained from his face at Konoha’s declaration.

“Um, Shinonome-san? What is going on?” I whispered. My adoptive father scratched his head, seemingly just as perplexed as I was.

“Well, apparently that girl over there grew quite curious about the human world after reading our books. Then she decided to go and visit a human city and ended up falling in love with a man there.”

“Oh... Right. Yeah, I would be worried about a spirit falling in love with a human too,” I said. Not only were the two lifestyles wildly different, but they were also, quite literally, worlds apart. It wasn’t so strange that Konoha’s father would be against it.

Suddenly, Tamaki-san, who had been quietly watching the events unfold, began to chuckle. “What are you saying? It doesn’t matter that the object of her love is human. That Hakuzosu looks just about as overprotective as Shinonome here, so he would probably freak out over *any* man his daughter fell in love

with, human, spirit, or otherwise. This is all just a silly fight between parent and child that could have been kept to their own home.”

I laughed nervously at Tamaki-san’s brutal honesty and looked over at the father and daughter pair who were still arguing. I guessed it showed just how much he cared about her. I peeked at Shinonome-san, who looked stern as ever.

“Yeah, I suppose. I can certainly understand the pain of seeing your daughter fall in love with a random guy from who-knows-where,” he said.

“Ack...!” I grimaced. I felt my face go pale as I realized the one important thing that had slipped from my mind. What would happen if he found out about Suimei and me?!

“Hey, Shinonome-san? What if I...you know...what if I brought a boy home?” I probed, fidgeting. I looked at him and saw that his eyes were filled with unmistakably murderous intent.

“...If he ain’t good enough for my Kaori, then I’ll kill him,” he said.

*Eek! He’s being completely seriooouuus!* Only a killer could look the way he did now. A chill ran down my spine.

Then I suddenly heard a great *whoosh*, and a bellow of air hot enough to make my skin prickle swept past my cheek.

“Enough nonsense, Konoha! You are being such a child!” Hakuzosu boomed. His rage had returned.

I nervously turned to see what was happening. Hakuzosu was now surrounded by balls of fox fire, and his stance also seemed much more aggressive than before.

“I would have relented if you had at least fallen in love with a spirit, but a human?! No humans! Ever!” he shouted.

*Looks like Tamaki-san was wrong about that.* To be honest, it scared me a little to see Hakuzosu snap so hard over this. Clearly, something a little more than his love for his daughter was at play here.

Hakuzosu and Shinonome-san turned to face each other. Both men’s eyes

were filled with violence ready to boil over.

“Sorry, Shinonome, but this isn’t like the old days anymore. The lands of spirits and humans are more clearly divided than ever, and we lead very different lives. In this day and age, stories crafted by humans bring nothing but harm to us. And to prevent that harm from spreading, I must make sure your business is shut down for good. The spirit realm has no use for such an unscrupulous bookstore!” Hakuzosu roared.

“Ha!” Shinonome-san laughed, the single syllable daring and fearless. He raised his right hand as it crackled with electricity. “I can’t have you storming in here and making a mess however you like, now, can I? And if you have a bone to pick with my business, you’ll have to go through me first. I have a lot of pride in what I do, and you should be more than aware of that!”

Hakuzosu scoffed. “It is my duty as your friend to stop your business if it’s going to bring more harm than good, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Who’s to say? I just lost a friend, so I wouldn’t know. Not! One! Bit!” As Shinonome-san shouted, he ran toward Hakuzosu with blue-white lightning crackling from his entire body. He was mad—really, *really* mad. The horns that grew from his forehead were glowing, and traces of scales were starting to surface on his skin.

*Oh, this is bad! Really, really bad!*

Fire and lightning enveloped our surroundings. One wrong move, and the whole thing would go up in flames. Worst of all, most of the buildings in this town were made of wood, and no one could say for sure how long they would remain safe. The whole town could be devastated with a single spark, especially in a world where there were no firefighters. The only way to put out a large-scale fire would be to destroy the affected buildings to save the rest.

“Sh-Shinonome-san! No!”

“That’s enough, Father! Please!”

As Konoha and I tried to stop the two, some unexpected voices rang out.

“Hah!”

“Enough of this, you idiot.”

It all happened so quickly that I had trouble processing what was going on, but three figures had moved behind Hakuzosu and Shinonome-san.

It was Kinme, Ginme, and Tamaki-san. Kinme raised a knife against Hakuzosu’s throat, and Ginme struck the fox in the solar plexus.

“Gngh...!” Hakuzosu grunted. His eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he fell unconscious. As he was about to hit the ground, the twins stopped him.

Tamaki-san was with Shinonome-san, slapping his face again and again.

“*Ooowwwwww!!!*” Shinonome-san pressed his hands to his swollen cheeks and glared furiously at Tamaki-san. “What the hell was that for?! And did you really have to call me an idiot?!” he grumbled.

Tamaki-san faced Shinonome-san like he was about to begin one of his signature stories. “I’m in the business of being honest, Shinonome. If I see an idiot, I’m going to call them one. Did you know that readers consistently hate fools who lose their cool at the most important times? Those fools do tend to make the plot take a turn for the worse, so of course they would. Do you want to become the clown who brings tragedy upon the cast?”

Tamaki-san cocked his head slowly and pointed toward the bookstore.

“You very nearly burned your own shop to the ground, you know. If you have a death wish, at least fulfill it away from here.”

“Gck...” Shinonome-san was lost for words. He scratched his head, trying to reduce the awkwardness in the air.

“Thanks for stopping me when I couldn’t. I shouldn’t have let my temper get the better of me,” he apologized.

“Good, at least you get it now. So, how about going home and getting some rest? You’re practically blue in the face. Tell me if you feel sick,” Tamaki-san said, and Shinonome-san’s face twisted into a strange expression for a second. However, he said nothing and only nodded.

Suddenly, as we headed back to the bookstore, Shinonome-san’s eyes sharpened as if he sensed some sort of danger.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“O-oh, it’s nothing. Sorry,” he said. He rubbed a hand against his abdomen and called out to Kinme, who still had Hakuzosu hoisted in his arms.

“Hey, could you take him to Mount Kurama’s Sojobo? Let him cool his head off there. He’s not a bad guy, but he does get riled up by the smallest of things. I’m sure that all he needs is a bit of time and a chance to talk it over some more. I’ll be over when I can.”

Once he had said his piece, Shinonome-san wobbled his way over to the bookstore. He didn’t look like he was doing too well. Maybe he was hung over? He had drunk a lot the previous day, after all. I anxiously watched him as he staggered. Then, Kinme spoke as he adjusted Hakuzosu in his arms.

“Well, I guess that’s that. And we only just came back to the spirit realm too! What a shame. Suimei, Ginme, let’s make our way back.”

“Yeah. Can’t say no to Shinonome, can we?”

“Y-yeah...”

Kinme signaled something to the other two men with his eyes, then turned to speak to Konoha.

“Well, you heard all that, right? We’re gonna be stealing your dad for a bit. I know Shinonome said that all he needs is a bit of time and whatnot, but I don’t think it’s going to be that easy. Just in case, could you think up your own strategy too? We wouldn’t want him going berserk on the bookstore again, now would we?”

“Got that right!” Ginme chimed in. “Maybe we’ll let the old bozos drink it out, get some feelings off their chests, y’know? We’ll pay now and get the money back from this old man here later. Hey, Suimei, go buy some stuff we can snack on over drinks! And make sure it’s tasty stuff too!”

Suimei nodded. “Sure.”

Then he snuck a glance at me. He seemed like he wanted to say something, but Ginme hurried him away.

“Huh...?” As I watched Suimei get farther and farther away, I tilted my head in

confusion. “But what about my confession...?”

Of course, there was no one to answer that question for me. There was someone still here, though, and he sounded very relaxed considering what had just gone down.

“Oh, goodness. There’s been a bit of trouble here, hm?” said a stocky man who seemed easygoing and almost cocky in his demeanor.

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“Pardon me. I’m the father of that girl who’s currently clinging to Konoha for dear life. I go way back with Hakuzosu, and I came because I heard there was a fight breaking out. He’s caused quite the fuss, hasn’t he?”

The man wore a kimono with a gaudy pattern and cloaked his shoulders in a black haori. His legs were covered by wraparound kyahan leggings and his feet by straw sandals. He smiled like an old friend and clapped a hand against his slightly protruding belly. A tail and a pair of ears not unlike a raccoon dog’s sprung from his behind and his head. There was no question: This man had to be the famous spirit, Shibaemon-tanuki...!

“I-It’s an honor to meet you, sir!” I stammered.

“Oh, what’s this? You know who I am?”

“Of course!” I exclaimed. “You’re a very famous tanuki!”

Shibaemon-tanuki was a yokai who lived on Awaji Island of Hyogo Prefecture. According to the stories I’d heard, he was notorious for paying for plays with leaves that he had transformed to look like money. Even now, he was still very well liked by the island locals.

One of the Three Great Tanuki of Japan, Shibaemon-tanuki also fought in the Awa Tanuki Gassen, a war between raccoon dogs that took place toward the end of the Edo period. I’d always wanted to meet him, especially because of the rumors about his fantastic transformation skills.

“But why have you come all the way out here?” I asked.

“You see, Konoha was introduced to this bookstore by my daughter, Tsukiko. Tsukiko loves to come here, so I ran over as quickly as I could the moment I

heard it was in danger. I couldn't just stand by and let it get destroyed," he replied. The girl who was hiding behind Konoha nodded sharply, her eyes wet with tears.

I thought I remembered this Tsukiko that he mentioned. She was indeed one of our most frequent customers, and she read a wide range of genres, diving into the latest romance novels, foreign novels, and even manga and light novels. But I didn't recall ever talking to her. She was quite withdrawn, so I never really got the chance to. I hadn't even known she was Shibaemon-tanuki's daughter!

Shibaemon-tanuki grumbled to himself thoughtfully, stroking his graying beard.

"This looks like more of a problem than I thought. Hakuzosu can be quite stubborn, you know. I don't think anyone will be able to change his mind so easily," he said.

"Is he really *that* stubborn...?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, especially when it comes to his daughter. Not only that, but he seems completely convinced that stories written by humans are a bad influence. Hakuzosu's also quite well liked among the foxes, so he can mobilize a large number of them whenever he wants."

Hearing this, Tamaki-san's face visibly darkened. "If he and Shinonome can't work this out somehow, he'll probably bring over a whole bunch of those foxes and attack the bookstore again."

"Plus, he might tell all his friends about how rotten the bookstore is and ruin its reputation. Foxes are tricky like that!" Shibaemon-tanuki added.

"Nipping the source of the books in the bud, huh?" said Tamaki-san. "A classic strategy."

I gulped. "Hang on a second. Is this really going to blow up that much?!"

I must have seemed a lot more panicked than I thought, because at that moment, I heard someone begin to cry rather sorrowfully. It was Konoha, who was still being supported by Tsukiko. Great big teardrops were falling from her eyes.



“K-Kaori-san, I’m really so sorry about my stupid father...!” Konoha sobbed, her shoulders heaving. She brought a hand up to cover her face. “This is all my fault for falling in love too! I should never have done that. I truly am so, so sorry about this.”

“No, there’s nothing to apologize for, please. Love isn’t something we just choose to fall into, anyway,” I said, trying to comfort her. That was something that even I could understand, as inexperienced as I was. Love is not something we can control. In fact, it has such a strong hold over us that we cannot hope to fight it. Its tendrils bind us with our partner in love; it is always invisible and never something we can put into the right words.

“There is no need for you to ever regret falling in love,” I reassured Konoha. I reached out for her trembling hands and gently gripped them in mine, gazing into her watery gray eyes. She blinked at me in surprise and turned away shyly, but I could see that her mouth was twitching ever so slightly into a smile.

“Thank you. Sorry to ask, but might you be in love as well?”

The redness sprung into my cheeks again, and I nodded. “W-well, I... This is the first time I’ve ever fallen in love, but... I know how painful it can be—and how fun it can be too.”

Konoha nodded back. “You’re just like me, then. I feel much better knowing that there’s someone here going through the same thing. But...”

The smile dropped from her face. She closed her eyes, weary from the day, and leaned against Tsukiko.

“Whatever am I to do about my father...?”

“Are you okay?” her friend asked.

“No, not really,” she replied. “I just can’t imagine living a future without my love...”

Tsukiko shook her head. “You need to stay positive, Konoha. I know you’re destined to live a happy and fulfilling life. I just do.” She began to stroke the fox’s head in an attempt to calm her.

Shibaemon-tanuki, whose eyes had been closed in deep thought, suddenly

spoke. “Jeez, I guess I’ve gotta do something about this, then!”

Tsukiko looked up, “Really?”

He nodded. “Of course, my dear. Who else could solve my darling daughter’s friend’s dilemma but me?”

Tsukiko’s face broke into a grin, and she gave her father a small hug. He allowed himself to relax for a moment and savor his daughter’s affection, but not a moment later, his face turned serious as he made a suggestion to me.

“They say that if a fox has seven tricks up their sleeve, then a tanuki has eight. So we raccoon dogs have the upper hand over foxes. I could transform myself into a fox, talk some sweet words to Hakuzosu, and convince him to let Konoha date a human!” He clapped his stomach again and continued.

“The plan won’t work with me alone, though. Bookstore Girl, go and fetch the other two Great Tanuki of Japan, Dansaburo and Tasaburo. And I think I might cash in on that favor Tamamo-no-Mae still owes me... I’m going to need that at the very least if I want to get through Hakuzosu’s thick, angry skull.”

“So the bookstore won’t be destroyed if we get the two Great Tanuki and Tamamo-no-Mae to help?” I asked.

Shibaemon-tanuki grinned at me widely, flashing his canines. “Well, I can’t say yes for sure, but I’ve gotta try and work at least as hard as you, right? I’m willing to let the name of the Three Great Tanuki of Japan ride on this!”

“Right. We can’t let the bookstore get destroyed. And plus...” I looked straight at him and balled my fists in annoyance. “I can’t believe Hakuzosu would blame the books like this! We all take away different ideas from what we read. How could he even suggest something as senseless as destroying the bookstore? I thought the age of burning books was long gone! Hasn’t he ever heard of keeping fiction and reality separate? I understand that he has his concerns as a father, but he has gone too far!”

My anger kept spiraling, and words continued to tumble from my mouth.

“Let’s do whatever we can to change Hakuzosu’s mind. And while we’re at it, let’s teach him how fun reading can b—”

“Calm down, you fool. You’re losing sight of the problem at hand here,” Tamaki-san cut in and gave me a whack.

“Ow!” I cried, tears springing to my eyes. I groaned and slowly looked up at the story-seller, who seemed awfully serious about this.

“Don’t get it twisted,” he said. “We’re not here to change his mind. This story is a simple one that doesn’t need all these unnecessary complications. We have one objective, *only* one objective, and that’s to make him accept the love between his daughter and her human. Nothing more, nothing less. Right?”

“Y-yeah...” I relented.

Tamaki-san sighed and shrugged. “I feel like I didn’t just get roped into all this by chance. I guess I could lend you all a hand too. I’m in the business of being generous, after all.”

“What?!” I was utterly shocked. Tamaki-san was offering to help? *The* Tamaki-san, who hated any and all kinds of trouble?

“Are you feeling all right? Did you hit your head or something?”

“How rude!” he tutted. “Well, say whatever you want. You are entitled to your interpretation of my actions. I tell stories not explanations, after all.”

He was trying to shake me off his tail! Suspicious...very suspicious indeed.

As I continued to wonder what Tamaki-san was playing at, Konoha and Tsukiko spoke.

“I would be more than happy to offer my assistance as well,” the fox said. “My father started this, and I want to fight for my own love.”

“Me too,” the tanuki nodded. “I will go wherever Konoha goes.”

“Thank you both,” I said. “All right. Let’s set out and gather as many helpers as we can!”

I clenched my fists, my will renewed. Shibaemon-tanuki grinned, triumphant and a little smug.

“Be careful, all of you. Tanuki and foxes both love to play tricks and transform all sorts of things. We’re a twisted lot, we are.”

“Ack!” I gasped. I froze, suddenly struck by the feeling that things were not going to go as smoothly as I would like.

Tsukiko peeked out from behind Konoha and whispered, “You go and talk to them, then, Father. I know you’re just being lazy...”

Shibaemon-tanuki sputtered. “What... No! I just can’t travel that far with my ailing hip. Going to Kagawa and Sado Island would be too much for me. And we just came up with this awesome plan! How could I bear to just throw it out the window?!”

“You always try and push all the troublesome stuff onto other people, Father. That’s why Mother left you.”

“N-no!” the older tanuki stammered. “Not here, Tsukiko!”

Tamaki-san watched on, bemused, as Shibaemon-tanuki panicked. Konoha giggled.

*I guess no father stands a chance against his daughter...*

Sometimes, I would think a lot about the relationship between fathers and their daughters. It was such a strange and fascinating thing to me. Mothers usually had fathers beat bar none when it came to closeness. There always seemed to be an invisible wall of sorts between father and daughter as they tried to navigate each other’s feelings. However, fathers were reliable during the direst of times, and they would always throw everything they had into protecting their daughters.

Hakuzosu *had* acted out of line, but he’d done so with his daughter’s best interest in mind. It was parental love that drove him to the edge...and I had to stop it before it could get any worse. I hated to see a parent be on such bad terms with their child, anyway. I had to do my best to make them get along with each other again!

I smiled and looked at the spot where I last saw Suimei.

“I never did get to hear how he felt about me...” I chuckled dryly, feeling a little sorry about the dress that had been made just for this day. How long would I have to wait until I could see Suimei again?

“Maybe I should write another letter...” I said to myself. I had no other way of reaching him, after all. Even if I couldn’t see him, I still wanted to stay in touch with him. I took a deep breath and straightened my back. That was enough of that for the time being.

“All right, where to now, then?” I turned and asked everyone.

*Tinkle.*

A clear chime rang out seemingly from nowhere. Perplexed, I looked around, trying to identify the source of the sound, but there was nothing that could have made it.

“What’s wrong?” the girls asked. “Oh, perhaps you have changed your mind about our assistance...?”

“No, it’s nothing.” I shook my head, and we returned to discussing our plans.

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There’s just something about summertime in the human world that made you want to knock back an ice-cold soda or two. It didn’t help that the vibrant blue sky above made me think of ramune—plus, the piles of fluffy, white clouds were the spitting image of ice cream scoops that would be perfect atop a tall glass of soda. And oh, the fizz of such a refreshing beverage was constantly being hammered into my mind by the endless chirps of the cicadas, which, you had to admit, sounded awfully similar to the human world.

If the blistering heat weren’t already effective enough at making me more parched than a desert, then being constantly reminded of a cool, sweet drink would certainly do the job. *Especially* when I was being bombarded by that heat in the middle of climbing seven hundred and eighty-five steps.

*Huff... Huff... Huff...*

I glanced upward at the stairs that seemed to stretch on for eternity and mopped the sweat from my brow. Right now, I was braving the steps that lead up to the Kotohira-gu Shrine in Kagawa Prefecture. They were famous for their sheer number and for the fantastic view of the town of Kotohira below. If you stopped and turned, you could also see the surrounding mountains, sometimes veiled in a thin haze like they were today. The peak was practically eye level

from where I was standing, and seeing it really drove home just how high I had climbed. Peeking at the people who I passed, I could see that their faces were also drenched in fatigue, but we still had a long way to go before we reached the final step.

Tamaki-san seemed especially fed up with how much climbing we had to do. His face had drained to a pale, almost sickly, blue hue.

“Oh, to *hell* with this!” he moaned. “Why do we still have to climb stairs in this day and age? Isn’t technology the crown jewel of modern civilization? What good is it if we can’t use it to install a lift that will take us straight to the top? I will admit that stairs make for dramatic storytelling in fictional mountains and valleys, sure, but we have no use for them in reality! Screw tradition! I want a lift!”

He continued to grumble like a man on a hexing mission. Sweat trickled down his forehead in steady streams, and the round glasses perched on his nose fogged on and off from his body heat. He trudged on with unsteady feet, and you didn’t have to hear him to know that he was heaving and gasping for air too. Personally, I didn’t mind the trek; Kotohira-gu was the only place where you could climb these steps, after all.

I giggled and called out to Tamaki-san. “You could’ve just stayed at the bottom and waited for us, then! Or hired some of the people down there to carry you up in one of their litters!”

Tamaki-san glared at me with his dull right eye.

“Oh, shut it. As if I could ride my way up while the rest of you clambered up on foot!”

“Oh ho!” I called with a smirk. “You’ve got your man’s pride to protect, huh?”

He groaned. “Say whatever you want. Jeez...this is pathetic.” He drove a fist into his right leg in irritation.

I never figured out why, but Tamaki-san’s body seemed to be weaker on his right side. It wasn’t so severe that he needed to use a cane, but there was a clear unevenness to his stance that gave it away. Maybe it had something to do with his previous life as Toriyama Sekien. I knew that he went by that name

long ago, back when he was an accomplished artist who created many illustrations of yokai. He was so famous that he took countless apprentices under his wing and even illustrated for government officials.

However, information about him is surprisingly scant, and little else was known about him. Word is that soon after he announced *Hyakki Tsurezure Bukuro*, the final installment of his famous *Gazu Hyakki Yagyo* tetralogy, he passed away—his grave can even be found at the Komyo-ji Temple in Motoasakusa. And yet, here he was before me as a young thirty-something, with the right hand that was sure to have been his pride and joy as an artist now ailing.

It does make you wonder about the kind of life he led. It definitely must have been eventful, but even now, he preferred to keep his lips tightly sealed. All I knew was that he was an old friend of Shinonome-san's and that he now made a living selling spirit anecdotes to fanatics in the human world. He revealed little else.

Secrets, secrets, and more secrets...

A thought popped into my head. I squatted down before the heaving and huffing Tamaki-san and peered at him.

"By the way..." I began.

"Wh-what is it? I haven't got any time for your little jokes right now!"

"You're up to something, aren't you?" I continued.

Shocked by my bluntness, Tamaki-san twitched the corner of his mouth.

"What are you talking about?"

I shrugged. "I can see right through you, you know. We've done countless errands for you, but this is the first time you've ever offered to come as well. And you're just not the kind of person to give in to chance, or fate, or whatever."

I darted a quick glance at my bag. It was stuffed full of files that Tamaki-san had collected for this case—extremely detailed ones, with notes on everyone involved down to their hobbies and interests. It matched the story-seller's usual

modus operandi; he would gather all the information he could get his hands on and leave its use and interpretation up to other people.

“Plus, you wouldn’t torture yourself with these steps unless it were absolutely necessary. Let’s see... Whatever you’re planning requires you to stay physically close to us, doesn’t it?” I probed.

“Is this some sort of test?” Tamaki-san asked, shaking his head limply from side to side.

I grinned at him. “Just saying what I’m seeing. I actually think you’ve got another goal in mind, but yeah.”

Suddenly, the other girls called out to me.

“Kaori-chan! The Gonin Byakusho families here have set up stalls on the shrine grounds, and they’re selling candy!”

“They’ve got kamiyo-ame and bekko-ame! They all look so good too. Would you like some?” Tamaki-san and I were drenched in sweat, but Konoha and Tsukiko seemed as if they had not walked a single step and were bursting with energy as they waved to us. They lived their daily lives running about in the mountains, so to them, the staircase was but a simple hill.

Konoha, Tsukiko, and I had grown fairly close over the course of the journey. We were sisters-in-arms when it came to romance, and we had a lot in common to talk about. Although Tsukiko had no specific love interest on her mind, she was deeply familiar with books that I had never thought about reading myself, and it was very fulfilling just hearing her talk about them. Whenever we chatted, our conversations would snowball, and it made this unexpected visit to Kagawa more fun than I thought it would be.

“Hurry, Kaori-chan! We need to pick up those good luck charms for romance!” Konoha urged.

“Okaaay!” I called back.

Hearing what Konoha said, Tamaki-san’s eyes glazed over. “Good lord, don’t tell me we came all the way here for some trinkets...” he mumbled.

“How rude!” I said. “And, well, why not? We still have plenty of time. The



talks between Shinonome-san and Hakuzosu might not end badly after all, so why not do what we can to ensure that Konoha's love will come true?"

Tamaki-san raised an eyebrow. "I don't buy it."

"Well, you should!" I insisted. "Anyway, there's also that saying from the Edo period about going on a pilgrimage to Kotohira-gu at least once in your life, right?"

It started during the time when common folk were forbidden from traveling except for religious purposes. The most popular destinations for prayer then were the Ise Jingu shrine, which was fondly nicknamed "Oise-san," and the Kotohira-gu.

"It'd be such a shame to come all the way to Kagawa and not pay this place a visit! You lived during the Edo period, didn't you? I thought you might like to come here because of that."

Tamaki-san fell silent and knitted his brows. His dull right eye betrayed something stirring within him, and he let out a bitter chuckle.

"You should have told me first, then. You're so pushy, just like Shinonome."

"Ha ha ha!" I laughed. "Sorry, sorry. You know how it is." I took a bottle of water out of my bag and offered it to Tamaki-san.

"You know, the more I find out about you, the more I realize how interesting you are. The way you created our Christmas tree still blows me away! I just wanted to do something that would make you happy, since you've really grown on me."

"What am I, moss on a rock?" Tamaki-san shot back.

I giggled. "And, well, I've known you since I was a kid. You're kind of like an uncle to me."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Tamaki-san said. "You should take a leaf out of that Suimei boy's book and keep your distance."

"Ha! That reminds me of the time you taught him how to release himself from his Inugami," I recalled. "That sure got messy, didn't it? But I don't think Suimei's mad at you. Just...wary of suspicious adults."

“You should be wary too, especially when you already suspect me of being up to no good,” Tamaki-san tutted.

I shrugged. “Oh, I don’t think I have to worry about you. The true mastermind of our story would never say that!”

Now that the tropes he so often discussed had been turned on him, Tamaki-san puckered his face like he had just swallowed a cup of tart lemon juice.

“I don’t mind if you’ve got some secret plan cooking, and you don’t have to tell me what it is if you don’t want to, but please let me know if there is anything I can help you with. I’ll do my best,” I said.

The story-seller fell silent once more.

“I want to support you however I can,” I offered.

In a flash, Tamaki-san’s face stiffened. Maybe I’d overstepped a little... I tried to lighten the mood by continuing in a joking tone.

“Oh, but if the plan involves causing trouble for other people, then I’d want you to, you know, not go ahead with it. If you act out, I’ll bury you in the middle of Angel Road and leave only your face peeking out. Got it?” I warned.

His face relaxed. “So you want me to drown when the high tide hits, huh? I could see that foreshadowing coming from miles away. But I must say that you could make any storybook villain quiver in their boots.”

“You think? Oh, that reminds me. Did you know that if you cross Angel Road holding hands with someone you hold dear in your heart, your wish will come true?”

Tamaki-san was not particularly amused by this. “What wish could possibly be granted in the place that might become my *tomb*?”

I chuckled. “That’s a good question!” Bursting out into a louder laugh, I instinctively held on to his right arm, trying to offer him some support.

“Sorry for making you climb all this way when you’re not the best on your legs. Do you want to go back down?” I asked.

Tamaki-san shook his head slowly and looked down at the town of Kotohira.

“No, I’m all right. And you were right too. I did wish to come here, once. And my, what a stunning view. It’s truly one of a kind. I’m sure she would’ve loved this.”

My ears perked up. “Who?”

But he dismissed it. “Ah, just a slip of the tongue. Forget I ever said anything.”

He spoke no more after that. It was like a storm cloud had passed over his face, which was now shadowed with melancholy. The cry of the cicadas around us lashed like raindrops against a window. I joined him in his silence, and the rest of the summer trek at Kotohira-gu passed by without another word.

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The purpose of our journey to Kagawa was to find Tasaburo-tanuki, the Great Tanuki who made his home in a place called Yashima, where the Genpei War was fought long ago. Back then, Tasaburo-tanuki had sworn to be a protector of the Taira clan. While other raccoon dogs were known for transforming into humans and playing tricks on mortals, Tasaburo-tanuki was famous for the good deeds he performed. After the ruin of the Taira clan, he moved to Yashima and became the local deity of protection.

We chose him as our first target for one reason: He seemed like the most reasonable one. That probably sounded a little presumptuous, but tanuki tended to be tricky creatures, so we figured that it was important to start off on the right foot. Supposedly, we could find him at the eighty-fourth stop of Shikoku’s Eighty-Eight Temple pilgrimage—the Yashima Temple. It was an old structure with a venerable history. It was reportedly built by a monk called Jianzhen, and part of the main building survived from the Kamakura era.

“Girls, listen to this! There’s a deity here called Minoyama Daimyojin who brings good fortune for matters of the heart!” Konoha chattered animatedly as she approached the shrine where Tasaburo-tanuki was deified. “Raccoon dogs mate for life, and Tasaburo-tanuki and his wife are a prime example of everlasting love. That’s why this shrine brings lots of blessings for love and marriage!”

“Wow, Konoha, you’re so smart! Now we definitely have to buy a charm here!” I said with an eager nod.

Tamaki-san rolled his eyes. "You already bought a charm from Kotohira-gu. Do you really need another?"

"Yes, we do!" the two of us shouted back.

"We have to put the effort into buying the charms and wishing with all our heart!" I argued.

Konoha sniffed. "An old man like you could never understand how we feel...!"

Tamaki-san sighed. "Wow. I just got an insult thrown real casually at me."

As the two kept bantering, I slowed my steps and looked up at the sky.

*When will I receive a letter back...?*

Yesterday, before we left for Kagawa, I'd sent another letter to Suimei. I ended up letting slip that I regretted not having the time to speak with each other, so now I couldn't help but wonder what he would say in his reply.

Well, there was no point in agonizing over it. It would take at least a day to reach him, and he was probably busy with his own stuff anyway...

As lonely as I felt, what I needed to do now was focus on Tasaburo-tanuki.

I took a deep breath and was about to return to the conversation when the air suddenly shifted. A strong wind gusted through the grounds, and the birds in the trees began to chitter restlessly. The world seemed eerily quiet despite the gale, and then, I realized that the cicadas had completely ceased their cries. The skies were now shrouded in gray, and my skin could barely feel the sun's piercing rays anymore. Instead, a chilling breeze crept along my cheeks and sent a shiver running down my spine. It felt as if all the life had been sucked out of the air.

"What is going on...?" I trembled.

I turned around, trying to get my bearings, and spotted the Minoyama Daimyoin shrine next to the main temple. It was flanked by two large stone statues of tanuki, and between them sat an offertory box with a small lid on top. The torii gates stretched in a formidable row of brilliant red, and at the very end, you could make out the face of a ceramic shigaraki tanuki. As I stared at it, I felt a strong presence glaring right back at me.

“...Oh! Right there!” Konoha pointed to the side. I looked where her finger was aiming and saw a statue of a tanuki wearing a conical hat with a baby tanuki in tow.

But the statue wasn’t important; it was what was *above* it.

“I thought I smelled my kin. And look who’s here! It’s Tsukiko!”

At first glance, the speaker seemed to be nothing more than an average raccoon dog. However, upon closer inspection, it was clear that his round eyes shone with the light of lucid thought and that his lovable appearance hid an undeniable air of high intellect.

He lightly hopped off the statue and greeted us with a polite nod.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you folks. My name is Tasaburo, and I am the protector of Yashima. Come, follow me—you must be feeling weary from your arduous journey.”

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it, Tasaburo-ojisama?” Tsukiko said.

“My, Tsukiko, I never expected you to visit. You always seemed to prefer being cooped up in your room,” he replied.

My first impression of Tasaburo-tanuki was that he was quite likable, though I suppose that was to be expected from a spirit well known for his kindness. He had a gentle air about him and spoke in a way that was very easy to understand. It was no wonder that he had become a protective deity. Now that I had met him, I was sure he would listen to what we had to say.

But, of course, things weren’t going to be that easy.

“My apologies, but I am unable to offer you my assistance,” was all Tasaburo-tanuki said after we recounted all the trouble that happened. The innocence of his gaze made it hurt all the more to hear his rejection.

Tasaburo-tanuki remained still and serene, as if his mind were clearing. A few quiet seconds slipped by, and birds began to perch atop his head and chirp their sweet songs. Oh, he looked so adorable... *But wait, that’s beside the point!*

“B-but why?!” I blurted out.

If Tasaburo-tanuki was bothered by my outburst, he didn't show it. The deity simply answered, "Long ago, my ancestor made a pledge when he was rescued from the brink of death. He swore that he would commit himself to protecting humans and do as much good as possible. It is my sworn duty to uphold that pledge. Therefore, I cannot participate in any activity that could cause me to commit any manner of misdeed."

"Misdeed?!" A vibrant shade of scarlet flooded Konoha's cheeks as she opened her mouth in protest. "How would asking my father to approve of my love be a *misdeed*?!"

Tasaburo-tanuki stayed calm as ever as he spoke again. "My child, I have no qualms with letting a human and a spirit indulge in their love. Romance between the two is as old as time. If I may be quite honest, the trouble I sense comes from the bookstore's side of things."

Now it was *my* turn to be shocked.

"What?!" I yelped, my voice odd and strangled. Tasaburo-tanuki let out a soft huff and waggled his tail.

"I think Hakuzosu's concerns about letting spirits read human stories are not completely unfounded," he said.

"So then you don't see a problem with the bookstore being destroyed?" I countered.

"I do not. After all, many of my kin have been hurt by human stories."

I blinked. I couldn't process what I was hearing Tasaburo-tanuki say.

"Your kin? So, you must mean other tanuki. What do you mean they were hurt by human stories...?" I pressed uneasily.

The yokai's eyelids drooped close with a heavy sadness. "Tanuki have often starred in human stories in a range of vibrant roles. However, the problem lies in the fact that many of them meet with miserable ends."

He was not wrong in that regard. Many tanuki in fiction were mauled by dogs, chased away, killed, and even eaten. In older stories, particularly, their treatment left much to be desired. A lot of them were portrayed in villainous

roles and punished far more heavily than was deserved for whatever wrongdoing they had committed, with karma as the excuse. It was understandable that Tasaburo-tanuki was so bitter about this.

“Think of the damage this could have on a young tanuki if they were exposed to such horrible treatment of their kind,” he continued. “The shock could breed hatred toward humans in their hearts, and even lead them to commit misdeeds in the name of vengeance. In turn, those tanuki could then be persecuted and hurt by humans, who would then go on to create even more stories featuring tanuki as the villains. Wouldn’t that be such a tragedy?”

He shook his head softly and peered at me again with his round eyes.

“If the bookstore must fall in order for my kin to be protected from harm, then fall it shall. I cannot help with Shibaemon’s plan if it means that the bookstore will continue to operate, as that would be a misdeed.”

*No... No way...!*

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. There was just no way. How did he get everything so twisted?!

My legs began to move by themselves, carrying me toward Tasaburo-tanuki. I hoisted him up and tried to bury my anger deep down, but even as I spoke, I could tell that my voice did not match the composure I was trying to assume.

“I’d like to speak with you more, if that’s all right.”

Tamaki-san scrambled and grabbed Tasaburo-tanuki from me, trying to shield the yokai in his arms. “Wait, wait, wait. *What the hell are you doing?!*”

*Hmph, that was a little rude. It’s not like I was going to whisk him away and barbecue him!*

“Tamaki-san, why are you trying to stop me?”

“You still don’t get it?” he said. “Tasaburo-tanuki is the deity who protects this island. You need to calm down! Remember what Shinonome did that one time?!”

I gasped, and my breath stopped dead in my throat. I’d almost made the

same mistake as Shinonome-san!

I could feel all eyes on me. I turned slowly, afraid to meet everyone's gaze, and saw Konoha and Tsukiko looking back at me with worried expressions. The adrenaline faded, and I bowed my head in a desperate apology.

"I'm... I'm really sorry! For what my father did—and for what I almost did!"

"As long as you understand. Jeez, you two are always causing so much trouble for the rest of us..." Tamaki-san murmured as his lips curled into a wry smile.

However, although I had calmed down, I still could not see eye-to-eye with Tasaburo-tanuki.

I cleared my throat. "Please, Tasaburo-sama, listen to what I have to say!"

"Wh-what is it...?" he asked hesitantly. He looked almost scared now, and I grinned.

"The stories that have been passed down through the ages and the characters who appear in them all had their reasons to be created. If you don't mind, I'd like to share my thoughts about them with you," I proposed.

Tasaburo-tanuki tilted his head, puzzled. "What reasons?"

I glanced at the sky, which had turned a deep crimson red. We probably didn't have much time until we were forced to leave the grounds, but maybe this lack of time was for the best. This way, I could buy myself a bit more time to prepare.

"Please, allow us to have a bit more of your time tomorrow. Give me a chance to convince you to help us!" I implored, puffing my chest out. Tasaburo-tanuki's eyes widened in surprise for a moment, and then he burst out laughing.

"Pfft... Heh. Do as you wish. You can always find me right here."

"Thank you!" I nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow, then. I promise I'll prepare a very persuasive argument for you!"

I turned and saw that the other three were not convinced by my brave declaration. *Maybe I went a little overboard there...*

"I-It'll be fine!" I said. "Just leave everything to me tomorrow!"



I stuck out a confident thumbs-up.

*Wow, talk about awkward...* I thought.

We decided to wrap the day up so we could rest and prepare for tomorrow. We took lodgings at a local guesthouse, high up enough to give us a view of the Seto Inland Sea. I gazed out at the waters from the balcony of my room and thought about everything that had happened.

“I can’t believe I had to hear someone say we’d be better off without the bookstore,” I muttered to myself. “I really didn’t see that coming. But because spirits are defined by the stories told about them, I suppose I can see why he’d be unhappy about it...”

That was precisely why Shinonome-san had decided to publish books too.

As human science and technology advanced, the gap between humanity and the spirits also widened. Spirits did not have a tradition of keeping their own written records, so if they didn’t make themselves known and have humans write stories and books about them, they would have no physical proof of their existence. Shinonome-san took up his pen precisely because he wanted to prevent spirits from fading into the unknown, and I thought that was an admirable thing to do.

“But maybe that’s exactly why Tasaburo-tanuki was concerned about how raccoon dogs were being represented in stories,” I pondered. That had to be the heart of the problem.

“I guess I’d be concerned too if I were him. Anyone would want to be portrayed in a good light. No spirit would want to be made into a villain. So, if I want to convince him, then...”

My head continued to spin in thought, but deep down, I already had a solid idea of what I wanted to argue tomorrow. All the necessary shopping had been done, and I believed I knew what was needed for raising our chances of success. However, I wasn’t confident that my plan was the correct thing to do. If I failed, that could spell disaster for us. Not only was Konoha’s love at risk of meeting an untimely end, but I might also lose the shop that I held so dear, and the mere

thought of it terrified me.

I wished I had someone there to cheer me on: I wished someone could tell me that I was on the right track, that they would support me in whatever I chose. Sure, this wasn't the first time I had to make an important decision, but in the past, I'd always had people around me, like Shinonome-san, Nyaa-san, or Noname, giving me the push I needed whenever I was unsure of the path I was taking. I was lucky enough to be blessed with so many loved ones, but now I was alone—and I wasn't the most confident person on the planet.

"Oh!" I jumped. A soft, fluttering noise snapped me out of my thoughts, and I tried to trace it. A white shape began to approach me out of the darkness.

It was a letter-crane!

"Calm down now, little birdie!" I called as I scrambled to catch it. Once I was able to carefully unfold it, I was met with Suimei's diligent penmanship.

"...Whoa! Suimei's going to help us too?!"

The letter explained that Suimei's party was going to ask the other Great Tanuki, Dansaburo-danuki, for help, and it also said what happened to Hakuzosu. Apparently, Shinonome-san and Hakuzosu had continued their discussion on Mount Kurama, but to no avail. So, Suimei and the twins decided to help us with our plan and head to Sado Island.

"I can picture Suimei struggling with the twins so clearly in my head. He must be having fun being pulled left and right by them," I giggled and traced a finger along the words on the paper.

And as I continued with the rest of the letter, I spat all over it in shock.

*Don't get into too much trouble, all right? I know exactly what you're like. When you feel like you're about to lose it, remember to stay calm, take a deep breath, and look around you to ground yourself. I worry when I'm not there to keep an eye on you, you know.*

"Sounding a whole lot like Tamaki-san there, Suimei..." I frowned. Was my temper really that bad? I *hmm*ed to myself and kept reading.

Then my breath stopped.

*But I know that whatever you decide to do will be the right choice. You may be reckless, but you never go wrong with your decisions, so I know that everything will turn out all right in the end. Be more confident in yourself. And if this whole plan goes up in smoke, as unlikely as that is, I'll be there to hear you out. So, do your best. When this is over, let's put some time aside to see each other.*

*Sincerely, Suimei.*

I shut the letter with a loud *fwap* and squeezed it close to my body.

“Nnnngggaaahhh!” I squealed and kicked my feet about. My heart began to swell again as the tightness returned to my chest.

Suimei wanted me to do my best! Oh, how did he know that I was feeling down?! As this wave of bliss and satisfaction flooded over me, I rubbed the letter against my cheek, unaware of what I was doing.

“I’m so happy... I promise I’ll do my best, Suimei...I promise!”

I sat on the floor and leaned against the wall. For a moment, something bright entered my vision.

It was the waxing moon, hanging in a silvery sliver in the night sky.

Because the human world was lit so brightly, there were fewer stars to be seen compared to the spirit world. The moon seemed almost lonely, floating in the darkness by itself. If it weren’t for Suimei’s words of encouragement, I might have become even more despondent just by gazing upon it.

Now that I had my confidence back, I bathed myself in its pale glow and closed my eyes.

Then I heard Konoha calling me from her spot in the room. “Is something the matter, Kaori-chan?” she asked.

I sat up quickly and then stood up, brimming with newfound determination.

“I’ve got a favor to ask of you for tomorrow,” I said. Konoha and Tsukiko turned to each other, looking a little blank at first, but then Konoha returned a knowing nod. Her eyes, too, began to blaze with a new will.

“So do we, actually.”

“There’s no room for error tomorrow,” Tsukiko chimed in. “The two of us put our heads together and brainstormed a lot.”

“We can’t let you go at this alone,” Konoha said. “My love is on the line too, after all!”

I felt my heart grow warm at their support. They were right: I wasn’t alone in this. I didn’t have to carry this burden by myself.

“Thanks, you two!” I said. “All right, it’s time for a strategy meeting!”

We had to do whatever we could to save Konoha’s love and the bookstore. I smiled at Konoha and Tsukiko, and the two spirits blushed and nodded in return.

Our discussion lasted for hours, deep into the night.

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It was the day after Tasaburo-tanuki had turned us down.

The weather was hot, but it felt cool enough when there was a breeze and some shade to hide in. We were now back on the grounds of Yashima Temple and found Tasaburo-tanuki waiting at the Minoyama Daimyoin shrine like he said he would be. We beckoned him into the shade of the trees and onto the blanket we had spread out on the ground.

“Are you sure you’ve got everything under control?” Tamaki-san whispered, his voice tinged with concern. Memories of my outburst yesterday were still fresh in his mind, no doubt.

“It’s kind of you to worry,” I said. “But don’t worry—I’ll be all right. The three of us poured hours and hours into this last night!”

Konoha and Tsukiko grinned.

“No problem is too big for this fox and tanuki pair!” Konoha declared.

“So...you know...we’ll do our best,” Tsukiko added.

“Great. That really fills me with confidence,” Tamaki-san sighed, but the two girls giggled in spite of him. They hurried to either side of Tasaburo-tanuki, took their seats, and put on their most hospitable smiles.

“How are we feeling today, Tasaburo-sama?” Konoha asked sweetly.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Tasaburo-tanuki stammered as the fox lifted him and placed him gently in her lap. While he was still confused, Tsukiko swiftly presented him with a small cup lacquered in vermilion, filling it with sake in one fluid motion. It was the Kawatsuru—the “river crane”—one of the emblematic brews of Kagawa.

“I found out recently that Kagawa Prefecture is said to be the birthplace of sake. Isn’t that right?” I said, trying to start a pleasant conversation.

“Correct,” Tasaburo-tanuki answered. “The story goes that Yamato Takeru’s younger brother, Kamikushi-ou, brewed sake in this very prefecture with the twelve princes. Kagawa has always been blessed in terms of rice production, which is perfect for making sake. When you say ‘Kagawa,’ people usually think of udon, but the sake brewed here is truly world-class. But how does this relate to the matter at hand?”

“Oh my, do you not like alcohol?” Konoha asked.

“Now, I did not say that,” Tasaburo-tanuki said. He knocked back his drink in one gulp, and his lips curled into a satisfied grin.

“Have some of this,” Tsukiko said. She promptly presented the tanuki with a dish that we had asked the hostess of the guesthouse to prepare. It was a local Kagawan dish called “Manba no Ken-chan,” which was made with manba leaf mustard cooked in a broth with tofu.

“Oh?” Tasaburo-tanuki’s interest was piqued. “Well, well... This is good!” He popped some into his mouth and immediately beamed. He was loving the gentle flavors of the dish. The leaf mustard was slightly bitter—just enough to stimulate the tongue—and the soft tofu married perfectly with the flavorful broth, which had been accentuated with a balanced dash of soy sauce. After washing it down with some Kawatsuru, he was in heaven. This particular brew of sake was loved for its refreshing taste, and rather than drowning out the flavor of the broth, it served as its marvelous companion.

Tasaburo-tanuki smacked his lips. He truly seemed to be relishing the meal.

Konoha chuckled and stroked the fur on his head. “Now, you’re in a better

mood to hear what Kaori-chan has to say, aren't you?"

"Hrm..." Tasaburo-tanuki mumbled. "So that was what you were after, eh? Very cunning of you lot!"

"Well!" Konoha exclaimed. "I am a fox, after all. We're quite good at playing tricks, just like you tanuki are."

Tasaburo-tanuki stifled a laugh, like he found what Konoha said to be funny or like he was laughing at himself for walking into something so obvious. His stubbornness from yesterday had long since faded. It looked like he would be much more open to hearing us out now.

The suggestion Konoha had made last night was truly genius. "We should offer Tasaburo-sama some generous hospitality and make him feel at home, so he'll listen to our proposal in high spirits," she said.

And now I had to do my part to make sure that her idea would not go to waste.

I began to speak as I refilled Tasaburo-tanuki's cup.

"Since its very first days, this sake has been made with the promise that it will go down smooth and be refreshing as a running stream. With this, I pray that my honest and heartfelt feelings will reach you loud and clear, Tasaburo-sama. Shall we begin our discussion, then?"

We brought out more food and alcohol for the three of us and lined ourselves up in front of the tanuki.

"Help yourselves, girls. We can all eat while we ponder our questions for today: What makes a tanuki a tanuki? How did the tanuki become what it is today? And finally, how did these magnificent creatures come to be saddled with the role of the sly and tricky villain?"

I darted a glance at Tsukiko. Catching my signal, she nodded, slightly embarrassed. She began to sip timidly at her sake, allowing herself to savor it.

Now, all the preparations were complete. I narrowed my eyes and began to speak in a low voice.

"Let us explore the origins of the tanuki's name. Our journey today takes us to

the end of Japan's Middle Ages..."

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"The people of Japan have often taken elements from the cultures of other countries and evolved them into something unique. Kanji is one example. Back when the Japanese had no writing system, they learned Chinese characters from the influences of the Korean peninsula and mainland China and introduced them to their own culture. And from those Chinese characters—kanji—hiragana and katakana were also born. The animal's name 'tanuki' was also originally from China. Did you know that the Chinese character for 'tanuki,' pronounced 'li,' generally refers to mid-sized felines such as the civet cat and the wildcat?"

"Felines...?" Tasaburo-tanuki was puzzled. "As in cats? Not raccoon dogs like myself?"

"In Japan, yes, that same kanji character would refer to raccoon dogs," I confirmed. "Of course, there has to be a story behind that. This is merely my own theory, but maybe when this 'li' character crossed the shores, the Japanese people didn't know what animal it referred to. For example... Take *Soushen Ji*, a collection of folklore and short stories from the Six Dynasties of China. It features a story that we call *Old Man Tanuki* here in Japan, but if you read it, you'll find that it never describes in detail what its tanuki, or 'li,' actually looks like."

"Well..." Tasaburo-tanuki contemplated. "If the story came from an oral retelling, then yes, that would seem likely."

"Then if someone wanted to know what this creature was, they would have to infer it from the other stories, wouldn't they? And isn't it fair to suppose that those who read the tales would try to match it with an animal that they were already familiar with?"

I suggested that these readers would wonder what form such tricky creatures would take and whether they existed in Japan in the first place. If they did, then what animal could it possibly be? And thus, 'li,' or 'tanuki,' was assigned to a number of creatures.

"We have many animals that could fit the description of a mischievous mid-

sized creature. Raccoon dogs, weasels, martens, badgers, giant flying squirrels, and even small boar were called ‘tanuki’ at one point or another. The *Kokon Chomonju* from the Kamakura period described the tanuki as a creature that flew from tree to tree. Doesn’t that sound more like a giant flying squirrel than a raccoon dog?”

Konoha giggled, still stroking Tasaburo-tanuki’s head. “It sure was a weird time. Approaching it with a modern mindset would only make it more confusing.”

I nodded. “I agree, though it’s kind of fun to fill in the gaps with our own imagination. That was probably how the uniquely Japanese idea of the tanuki came to be. In the *Poetry Contest of the Twelve Zodiac Animals*, which are picture scrolls said to have been created during the Muromachi period, the depiction of the tanuki more closely resembles what we know it to be today. After a long and rocky journey, it seems that the public consciousness had finally settled on what kind of creature the tanuki was.”

Which would mean that before this, “tanuki” was both a tanuki and *not* a tanuki.

“Tanuki” could have meant any type of medium-sized beast that lived in the mountains and caused harm to people.

“Fascinating!” Tasaburo-tanuki cried. “So, depending on the context, ‘tanuki’ may or may not have referred to us raccoon dogs!” He guffawed heartily, taking one more swig of the sake and another bite of the food, and chasing it down with yet another gulp of alcohol. The full 1.8-liter bottle we had brought had been reduced to half the volume in no time, and Tasaburo-tanuki looked happy enough. I prayed that we would keep sailing smoothly through this.

I hoped with all my heart that what I was about to say next would not anger him. I was sure that it was going to be all right, though. I had faith in myself.

I thought back to Suimei’s letter, took a deep breath, and resumed.

“So, this was how the concept of the ‘tanuki’ developed here in Japan. I believe the reason that ‘tanuki’ eventually came to refer to raccoon dogs, instead of martens or weasels or small boars, was because they were closest to humans, and at the same time, more hated by them. Because of this hate, they



were often portrayed as villains who would be killed by dogs and exterminated for the harm they inflicted upon humans.”

And now, we had arrived at the treatment of tanuki that Tasaburo-tanuki resented so much.

Tasaburo-tanuki, who had been cheerily indulging in the food and alcohol, froze. “...My kind have been branded the villains for a very long time, haven’t we?” he said with an icy chill in his voice.

I gulped. “W-well... Humans and raccoon dogs used to share the same habitats much more than they do now. And unlike dogs and cats, raccoon dogs are wild animals at the end of the day. They would be prone to ruining crops and spreading disease through their bites, and no doubt some people would have been scared by the sight of their eyes glowing in the dark of the night too.”

Tasaburo-tanuki heaved a sigh. “We tanuki are always saddled with so many misunderstandings...”

Sensing that the mood in the room was crashing, Tsukiko hurriedly held out a fresh cup of sake to the other spirit. “H-here, Ojisama,” she offered. He declined, however, and only glared at me. His agitated emotions were reflected in his eyes.

“What are you getting at?” he bristled. “You have done nothing but further sow distrust toward humans in me. You’re trying to say that we deserve to be mistreated and turned into villains by these people because we’re pests to them, is that it?”

*Oh, this is bad!*

“That’s not it,” I said. I couldn’t let all our efforts go to waste now. I still had the main conclusion of all my points up my sleeve, so I thought I should still be able to turn this around.

I breathed in deeply and pressed on.

“Back then, surviving from day to day was a lot tougher than it is now. Having a crop ruined by tanuki could lead to many deaths, and the risk of dying from disease was also much higher. That was why uncontrollable external factors

such as the tanuki, were feared. And, to warn others of their danger, stories about them were created. It was necessary for the society of the time, but that doesn't mean it's the same for the society of today. People's perceptions are constantly changing, after all. So, Tasaburo-sama..."

I swallowed.

"I would go so far as to say that *your* idea of the tanuki is outdated," I finished.

"You mean to say that I am behind the times?!" Tasaburo-tanuki's mood was worsening by the second, but I tried to ignore it.

"Yes, I believe that the concept you have in your mind does not align with humans' current perception of tanuki, just like the different Japanese and Chinese perceptions of what 'tanuki' and 'li' are."

With the passing of time, the Japanese idea of the tanuki had also changed. They were no longer branded as villains deserving of karmic retribution by default: They were now seen as lovable, funny creatures who just didn't know any better!

"As we moved into the modern era, we also began to give tanuki different roles in our stories. After tales of the supernatural exploded in popularity in the Edo period, humans began to give humorous traits to raccoon dogs. They now had the power to transform themselves and various objects, they went to the theatre like humans did, and when they accidentally let their identities slip, they would be judged accordingly. Even their physical appearances began to lean toward the comical side, as they were often shown wearing cone-shaped straw hats and given rotund stomachs and large testicles. Take the ceramic shigaraki tanuki next to the shrine, for example! It looks just like what I described, doesn't it?"

All heads turned toward the shrine. The shigaraki tanuki stared back, its eyes round and innocent.

"And, at the same time, tanuki also started being depicted as monks or priests," I soldiered on. "Since the *Bunbuku Chagama* fairy tale, there have been countless stories featuring tanuki who bring prosperity to different temples. Which is to say, humans were starting to see tanuki as creatures who

were beneficial to have around.”

Now, they were no longer relegated to just being the villains of the story. The way they were being represented in stories had changed. However, Tasaburo-tanuki didn't seem convinced. He shook his head and sighed.

“But the fact that they still face punishment hasn't changed. It is true that tanuki are now seen as comedic characters, but humans laugh *at* us, not with us. As long as this treatment continues, I cannot see what good comes from human stories,” he said, watching me with earnest eyes. “And, more than anything, I wish to keep my kin safe from harm.”

Even now, I couldn't help but marvel at how noble Tasaburo-tanuki was. I felt humbled by his divine virtue, but I couldn't back down after coming all this way—it was time for the main event!

I gulped back my unease, trying to reel my nerves in before my heart burst from the tension. I was now treading into territory that I was admittedly less familiar with. Which is why I had planned to leave it to someone who was more experienced, but...

“That's why we been sayin' you're old-fashioned, Tasaburo-ojisama...!” interjected a wobbly voice.

The entire space fell silent. Everyone turned to see who it was.

It was Tsukiko.

She hiccuped. Her entire face had turned rosy, even down to the slender neck that poked out from underneath her kimono. She was clearly drunk. I shot a quick glance at the huge bottle of Kawatsuru that we had brought and saw that it had been drained, with not a single drop of alcohol remaining. It was now rolling around on the ground, completely empty.

“Heh... Heh heh heh...! That sake...was sho good...” Tsukiko giggled with a bewitching smile as she cast her gleaming eyes over to Tasaburo-tanuki from behind her colored glasses.

“Er, Tsukiko? When did you have that much to drink? You're completely intoxicated!” he gasped.

“When you and Kaori-san were having your merry little chat,” she replied. “But who cares? I can get drunk if I wanna.”

Another hiccup. She stuck a finger against Tasaburo-tanuki’s cheek and cackled gleefully.

“Uh, Kaori...” Tamaki-san whispered. All the color had vanished from his face as he was gripped by the fear of impending danger.

I flashed a grin at him and gave him a big thumbs-up.

“Don’t worry! It’s all part of the plan!” I reassured him.

“What?!” he muttered. “What the hell kind of plan did you three cook up?!”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me what plan *you* cooked up for this trip,” I smirked.

“Time and place, Kaori! Time and PLACE!” Tamaki-san scolded, giving me a sharp whack on the head.

“Ow!!!” I cried, tears prickling in my eyes. *Rest in peace, my poor brain cells...*

I bit back the pain and looked at Tamaki-san, who returned it with defeat in his eyes.

“Look, of course I’ll help out if you need me to, but please save the plot twists for fiction,” he said.

So he was willing to let us do our thing, but if worse came to worst, he would step in and help...

I felt my heart warm up at his kindness. *Darn it, Tamaki-san! You’re growing on me even more now!*

“You don’t have to worry about a thing,” I said. “We spent a lot of time working on this plan.”

Konoha, who had been watching over the proceedings quietly until now, broke her silence. “If you have a job you want done properly, leave it to the experts, right? Tsukiko’s our expert from here on out.”

However, Tamaki-san still had his doubts. “But look at how drunk she is! She’s barely acting like herself! Are you sure this is a good idea?!”

“Of course,” Konoha said. “Tsukiko’s so withdrawn that she needs the alcohol

to make her say what's really on her mind."

"What?!" Tamaki-san squawked loudly. At this, Tsukiko began to rummage through her bag, her face lighting up cheekily. She continued to speak, her voice still swaying.

"You're such a worrywart, Ojisama. You sound like a saint, saying that the bookstore can go down for the greater good of the other tanuki. Very interesting take. Kinda. But you gotta dream bigger!"

She threw out her arms and sent the contents of her bag flying. The stacks upon stacks of illustrations nestled within fluttered through the air like fallen leaves and settled on the floor like scattered petals. Tasaburo-tanuki's eyes widened so much that they bulged out of their sockets.

"What... What is this...?!"

"Civilization has entered the blessed age of moe!" Tsukiko shouted. "The people love us tanuki! They positively LOVE us!!!"

Every single sheet of paper Tsukiko had brought was covered in drawings of cute girls adorned with tanuki motifs, like their signature fluffy tails and round ears.

Tsukiko was one of the regulars at our bookstore. Our selection extended past fine literature and novels and included manga, light novels, and comic adaptations of novels. We tried to keep a wide range so all our customers could find something that they liked. Tsukiko, in particular, seemed to gravitate toward works that put entertainment value first, with most of her purchases being books that had been adapted into movies or anime. I personally preferred works from the early to mid-twentieth century, perhaps because of Shinonome-san's influence, which is why I thought that this discussion with Tasaburo-tanuki needed to take newer works into consideration as well.

However, I also recognized that there were gaps to be filled.

So this was where Tsukiko would take the stage as the queen of modern-day works. No one else out there could talk about newly created publications as well as she could.

“Ojisama, you are stuck in the past,” Tsukiko pouted. “You are too fuzzy.”

“I do not think the *fuzziness* of my fur has any relation to the topic at hand...?” Tasaburo-tanuki said quizzically.

Tsukiko took the fur around his head in her fists and began to rub it back and forth with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Oh, but it does! I’m starting to think that your fur is so thick it’s clogging up your ears. Were you really listening to what Kaori-san was saying? Were you using that brain of yours to think about it? Do you really see modern-day Japan for what it is?”

“Modern-day Japan...?” The older tanuki was having trouble grasping what Tsukiko was trying to say.

“People in the olden days were, pardon me, a lot *dumber*. Ignorance was their sin. They were scared of everything they didn’t understand and excused it all as the will of God. That was what they did to the tanuki too,” she said. “Which, like...”

Her obsidian eyes narrowed as she staggered to and fro.

“...doesn’t that sound an awful lot like the situation with spirits?”

She hoisted the deity up and stared deep into his eyes.

“Back then, tanuki were no different from spirits. They were both feared by the humans because the humans were simply weaker. It was only with the advancement of civilization that tanuki went from being creatures of the unknown to the carnivorous mammalian canines of the *Nyctereutes* genus.”

Tsukiko pressed her nose to Tasaburo-tanuki’s, her eyes shining with drunken confidence. She swayed, the strands of her bob cut obscuring her face.

“Now that humans have been freed from the darkness that once plagued them, tanuki are just animals to them. And they think we’re adorable! They love us! Such is the power of moe! Moe!”

“What...? Moe...?” Tasaburo-tanuki furrowed his brows.

Tsukiko pointed at the illustrations spread across the ground.

“Take a good look at reality now. Would people draw us tanuki this way if they still feared and hated us? Would these pictures exist if they didn’t think we were super adorable and lovable?”

“Gngh...!” The older tanuki was at a loss for words.

However, Tsukiko wasn’t finished yet.

“Humans don’t live very long lives, so the values of their society are constantly shifting. Even now, people are trying to create a world where race, gender, rank, and identity can exist without barriers...maybe. And I think it’s fair to say that we also want that kind of world for ourselves.”

Her eyes began to water. She fought desperately through her tears, trying to make Tasaburo-tanuki understand her feelings.

“Humans create all sorts of stories, and among them, I’ve read so many kindhearted tales where sins end in forgiveness. That’s why I love them. You can’t just say you hate them without reading any. So read some, Ojisama. Please.”

Tasaburo-tanuki was speechless. It seemed that Tsukiko’s unabashed love and appreciation had finally reached him, and he could do nothing but stare back at the sincerity glittering in her eyes.

I paused to allow him to soak in Tsukiko’s words before approaching the young woman and wrapping her in a hug.

“It’s just as she says—times have changed,” I said to the older tanuki. “However, I know this doesn’t mean that humans have completely stopped painting tanuki as the villains, and it’s also possible that old stories will be exposed to new eyes.”

“Well... See, that is my point!” he insisted, struggling for ground to stand on, but I shook my head.

“No, sir, you misunderstand,” I said. “Stories can be *chosen*.”

“Chosen...?”

“That’s correct. Unlike in the past, we now have countless numbers of stories to pick from, with each of them covering unique ground and expressing

different thoughts and emotions. What some people may take to be the greatest masterpiece, others may find unpleasant to read. Just like how you find stories where tanuki are mistreated as villains dreadful enough to keep away from other tanuki,” I said.

No story can avoid having its author’s thoughts and opinions wrapped into it, and of course, not everyone is going to agree with what the author says. No piece of writing is unanimously loved by all without disagreement, but that’s no reason to reject literature altogether.

“I sympathize with your wish to keep your kin away from harm. Nobody wants to expose their loved ones to harm or anything that may cause pain. However, I had a reason for explaining how the idea of the tanuki was shaped in Japan at the beginning. It was because I wanted you to understand.”

“Understand what?” Tasaburo-tanuki asked.

“That every story was made for a reason,” I clarified. “And that every single one of them has its own milieu. They weren’t created in a void. They were created to fill a need that society had. They all have certain feelings and emotions embedded in them, and if a story is passed down through generation after generation, we can understand that the people found it important enough to pass down for so long. Stories are not something that can be erased so easily.”

“Then... Then what should we do?” Tasaburo-tanuki wondered aloud. “What should I do if I do not wish for my fellow tanuki to read such stories?”

“Well, none of you should force yourselves to read it if you don’t want to,” I said. “Choose what you think is interesting and purposeful. Once you sense that a story is not what you want, you can simply put it down and say that it isn’t for you. Because you can pick and choose what you want to read, there’s no need to worry about being hurt in the process.”

I cast my eyes to the sky above and squinted against the brightness of the bright, blue summer view that stretched above us.

“There are more stories than we can count in this world, and new ones are always being written with the new values that people hold. It would be such a pity for young tanuki to be denied stories where they can see their own kind go



on wild adventures, but that's just what I think."

I took a moment to catch my breath and bowed.

"So, won't you give the stories written by humans a chance? They're always waiting for someone to come and turn their pages. That's all I wanted to say today. Thank you so much for your time!"

It's inevitable that someone will become strongly averse to a story if it doesn't match with their values or if they don't understand the choices the author made and their intent. If they sense that it could potentially hurt or oppose what they hold dear to their heart, who could blame them for turning their back to it?

Sometimes, if you want to enjoy a story, you need to go in with an open mind and tell yourself that you can stop at any time if necessary. If you find stories that are not for you, then look for ones that *are* for you, and dive deep into their world and all the adventures they have to offer. That, to me, is the core of the hobby of reading.

I heard a chuckle ring out and lifted my head from my bow to see Tasaburo-tanuki laughing, his body shaking with each sound.

"You youngsters sure have me beat!" he announced. "I admit defeat. I can no longer say that the continued operation of the bookstore is wrong. I thought what I had argued was fair, but now that I see that they were nothing more than the closed-minded ramblings of an aging tanuki. Ho ho ho!"

In that instant, all the apprehension in the air dissolved. Tasaburo-tanuki, who still sat in Tsukiko's arms, waved his jolly tail about.

"I suppose I have no choice now but to help you with your plan to defuse Hakuzosu, eh?"

Konoha, Tsukiko, and I all gasped at the same time as we whipped around to look at each other.

"We did it!!!" the three of us exclaimed, hugging each other and laughing.

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"C'mon, Konoha, drink. Heh heh heh... I'll top you up..." Tsukiko cackled.

“Wait! Tsukiko, no, stop! I-I can’t drink that much!!!” Konoha squealed.

After our presentation had ended, we began to discuss finishing the rest of the food and proceeded to revel in the local Kagawan cuisine that we had brought. Tsukiko, who was not yet sober, decided to mess with her fox friend, and the rest of us watched and laughed with sympathy.

Among the merrymaking, Tamaki-san muttered, “All this to protect your kin, huh? I suppose that’s exactly what the tanuki known for his benevolence would do.”

Tasaburo-tanuki, who was leisurely sipping at the sake that remained in his cup, nodded. His head was heavy with satisfaction.

“Really? That’s what you think of me? Ho ho ho!” he chortled.

“...What do you mean?” Tamaki-san asked, surprised.

Tasaburo-tanuki winked mischievously. “This is my secret, so what I say here stays here, understood?”

Tamaki-san nodded in silent agreement. The tanuki leaned back, savoring the sunlight shimmering through the foliage, and began to speak.

“It is true that I am bound by oath to do good, but to tell you the truth, I haven’t gone out of my way to fulfill that mission during my lifetime. Clearing the sullied name of my kind has always been a bigger priority for me.”

Tasaburo-tanuki acknowledged that, of course, there *were* tanuki who committed misdeeds, but it wasn’t as if the whole species was bad. He couldn’t stand that all tanuki were still being indiscriminately painted as wicked. That was why he had reacted so strongly toward the tales spun by mankind.

“The goodness of a deed hinges on the result it produces. I’m sure that somewhere in my heart, I was prepared to commit wrongdoing if it would ultimately benefit my kin. It just so happens that, luckily, the situation never arose for me. Is that not the very mindset the humans would expect a tanuki to have?”

Tamaki-san shook his head in disagreement. “Whatever your intentions, the fact is that you’ve lived an honorable life as a tanuki of innate goodness. That’s

what you've put all your efforts into, right? And that reputation has persisted, even now... I was once told by a certain someone that names last through the ages because of those efforts," he said solemnly.

"True, true," Tasaburo-tanuki chuckled. "It is just as that *certain someone* says. Very wise. They sound like someone I would love to have a drink with sometime."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Tamaki-san said. "She... She is no longer with us, sadly."

Hearing that, my heart stopped beating for a second. That was a rare glimpse into the past of the ever-secretive Tamaki-san! But who was this mysterious character—this *she* they spoke of? At the very least, she seemed to have lived before his time in the spirit world. Was this the person he said would have loved to visit Kotohira-gu? I was dying to pick his brain about this and his past and his enigmatic plan, but he'd probably scold me for being nosy.

I grinned to myself, and Tamaki-san looked at me, his eyes so wide that I could see the whites all around his pupils.

"Wait... Have you been drinking?!"

*Oops.*

He must have noticed how red my face was in the moment. And I'd just realized one other thing too...

"Heh. Ah hah hah..."

I didn't have the best alcohol tolerance, either.

"Yeahhh... I been drinkin'... Shrange..." I slurred. "Why'm I sho tipsssy? I'm Shinonome-san's daughterr..."

"Yeah, but not by *blood*!" Tamaki-san said. "Jeez, where's the water...?"

He hastily began to dig around in his bag, even forgetting to insert a reference to some narrative device.

"You're sooo niice..." I did my utter best to look up at him while the world around me swayed and reached out a hand to ruffle his messy hair. "Jush like Shinonome-shan... 'Kay, 'm gunna promote you...to my daaad."

“What?” he cried out. “I thought you said I was your uncle?! Anyway, I reject that promotion!”

He sure was being loud, but I didn’t care. I flopped over, and my head landed in his lap. It was hard, and definitely not comfortable enough for a decent nap, but...I wanted to stay lying like this anyway. I closed my eyes.

After a long day, we had finally secured our first helper.

I didn’t know if we could say for sure that this whole thing was going smoothly, but as long as we kept this pace up, I figured that we should be fine.

But first, I wanted to write Suimei a letter to let him know that we succeeded.

As I thought about how much I liked Suimei, I let the drowsiness take me in its dark embrace.

“Wait, are you just going to fall asleep here?” Tamaki-san cried. “Kaori! Hey, Kaori!”

An hour passed. Tamaki-san, his legs being assaulted by relentless pins and needles and his face hot and red with anger, gave me the scolding of a lifetime and made me swear that I would never touch another drop again.

## Chapter 2:

### The Tanuki Monk of Futatsuiwa

**T**ODAY, MOUNT KURAMA was blessed with clear blue skies for as far as the eye could see. The sea of trees dazzled with their emerald expanse, and the high-altitude wind felt cool against the skin as it wove through the foliage. It's said that since the Heian period, Mount Kurama has been well loved by nobility as the place to beat the heat, especially in Japan's hot and humid summer. With the delicate song of birds and the scent of greenery that flooded the senses, the tranquility was enough to make anyone forget the hustle and bustle of the busy city, and no doubt it was accompanied by healing and great creative spirit.

And in this peaceful refuge, I, Shirai Suimei, was in the middle of a cacophonic blitz loud enough to obliterate my eardrums.

"Quit being so stubborn and just stop renting out your books!"

"I keep telling you, there is no way in hell that's going to happen!"

I was starting to pray that I could retreat from this "retreat," if you could even call it that now. The two men within earshot were arguing ceaselessly. One of them was Shinonome, the owner of the bookstore in the spirit world, and the other fox yokai Hakuzosu. They had almost started a fire in the spirit world two days ago and were now locked in a stalemate on Mount Kurama, swinging around a bottle of alcohol and spitting at each other all day and night instead of talking things out properly like they were meant to be doing. The way things were going, it seemed like no one was going to get any sleep tonight either.

"You'd agree that the bookshop is dangerous if you actually understood what I've been trying to say, Shinonome!" Hakuzosu roared.

"There's no meaning to take from your ramblings if it doesn't make any sense in the first place!" Shinonome shouted back.

At this point, the two grown men were just going in circles. They were like two magnets of the same polarization, forever destined to reject and repel each other. The master of Mount Kurama, its Sojobo, had asked me to keep an eye

on the two spirits, but I wasn't sure how much longer my ears could stand the fuss without collapsing in on themselves.

Suddenly, the argument took a new turn. Shinonome, who wasn't exactly known for his stellar temper, finally snapped.

"You're the only nut who would attack us just because their daughter fell in love with a human, anyway! You crazy helicopter parent! Have fun getting your daughter to *HATE* you!"

"I'm perfectly sane, thank you very much!" Hakuzosu huffed. "Humans and spirits are from different worlds, so it goes without saying that they should live separately! And you're the one whose daughter is fed up with her dad! You and your stupid bookslop!"

Sparks of electricity began to fly from Shinonome, and Hakuzosu's fox fire surrounded them both.

However, they fizzled out as soon as they had appeared. The Sojobo had set the grounds up so that no spirit powers could be used.

When the two men realized that their abilities wouldn't work, they balled their hands into fists.

"*Raaaaaarrgggh!!!*" they screamed and threw all their might into punches aimed at each other's faces. Both hits connected magnificently with their targets, and the impact was so forceful that the very structures of their visages seemed to twist and contort. Their eyes rolled to the back of their heads and they collapsed with a hefty thud, almost in slow motion, until they lay completely still without so much as a single twitch.

The birds chirped on like nothing had happened. Finally, Mount Kurama was allowed a moment of peace and quiet. What a grand waste of time and effort that all was! I heaved a sigh and glared at the two unmoving figures.

"These guys just had to mess everything up..."

At that moment, a certain someone appeared in my mind. It was Kaori, from when I last saw her during our first encounter with Hakuzosu.

*I don't think I've ever seen her wear makeup before...* I thought. And it might

have just been me, but her hair also seemed shorter from when we last met. And something about the dress she was wearing was different from usual too. She looked beautiful.

I groaned and grasped at my hair, exasperated, trying to ignore the heat rising in my cheeks and my own hopelessness about the emotions bubbling inside. An urge to shout and scream and run rattled within, but there was also a part of me that wanted to just...cry. My brewing feelings of uncertainty were close to their tipping point.

I balled up into a crouch and buried my head in my arms. I allowed myself a moment of weakness in the darkness.

“How long until I can give Kaori my reply...?”

There was no answer to be heard, only the carefree and blissfully unaware chirrups of the birds above.

From the moment I heard Kaori’s confession, I had been sucked into a quicksand of inner turmoil.

*“...I love you!”*

Echoes of her sudden declaration from the final day of my father’s catastrophe rang through my head. I was caught utterly off guard and could only answer her with stunned silence. As the shock spun like a whirlwind through my head, just one thought remained coherent:

*Dammit! She beat me to the punch!*

And of course she had to do it at the worst time in the worst possible situation!

Just remembering that day made my heart race. But still, there was a proper time and place for everything, and that was neither! Kaori was always that way, letting her emotions take the reins and doing things that no one else would do. She was honest like that—*too* honest—for better or for worse. Getting caught up in her trouble was far from amusing, which was why I wanted to be the one to confess!

I sighed. I was getting way too heated. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm myself down.

Well... It was nice to know how Kaori felt, at least. I was raised to suppress my emotions, so I didn't know how to navigate this whole...love thing. To be honest, it made me nothing but anxious, but the one thing glittering within these muddy waters was that my first love just happened to love me back. It should have been a joyous thing, but as luck would have it, I was cut short before I could take that final step I needed to take.

"Damn... It feels like I've already gone past rock bottom!" I grumbled. I had been so prepared to answer Kaori's confession that day, and because of Hakuzosu, I had to turn back here without even getting a chance to speak with her. It had been two whole days since then, and I had no chance of returning to the spirit world any time soon.

"Oh! Another dust-up between the two oldies?" said a laughing voice.

"Ah ha ha! I never get tired of them. They do it so perfectly, it's like they rehearsed it beforehand," said another.

I heard the powerful fluttering of wings and saw that the two Tengu twins had returned. As Ginme's feet touched the ground, his arms released the mound of black fur that he was carrying. It immediately darted toward me with such excitement that I could almost hear it go *vroom!* It was my Inugami companion, Kuro.

"Suimei! Suimei!" he yipped. "I was a really good boy today! Tell me I'm a good boy!"

"Is that so?" I said, looking over to the twins. Kinme smiled with his droopy eyes and nodded.

"Yeah, he did a super good job today! He took out the spirits that were coming at us from left and right, like *pow! Pa-pow!* He was like Fenrir from the Nordic myths!"

"Fenrir?" Kuro's ears perked up. "What's a Fenrir? Sounds cool!"

"Fenrir's a monster who looks like a giant wolf, from the legends of a faraway land," I said, petting Kuro's head. He seemed to like it, and he wagged his tail in



joy.

“Ooh! I’m a wolf! Hee hee hee!” he giggled.

I was glad that he’d been able to run around and go a bit wild. From the grin on his face, he seemed to be basking in what a successful day he had.

“But man, those things just don’t get tired at all, huh, Kuro?” Ginme mused.

“You can say that again! Don’t they get bored doing the same thing day after day?”

Ginme was talking about the spirits that would come all the way to the human world to slay a certain someone: my father, Shirai Seigen. He had become quite hated for the strife he had wrought upon the spirit world, and hordes of spirits would come to Mount Kurama to hunt his head in the name of revenge.

“I’m really sorry about my father,” I said.

“Nah, you’re golden. It makes for some fantastic training, anyway!” Ginme flashed me an easygoing grin. Now that his face was turned toward me, I could see that it was smeared with blood, probably not his own. “Plus, it’s kinda fun beating them up, you know? And we even get free meals here and there.”

He chuckled heartily. Kinme nodded and chimed in with his own “So true!”

But there was something cold beneath their cheery facade, and as I watched them, I remembered that I was looking into the eyes of predators. And, although they took a humanoid form, they were always going to be spirits at heart. Spirits who had no qualms about hurting others and relished in their blood...

*“Humans and spirits are from different worlds, so it goes without saying that they should live separately!”*

Hakuzosu’s words sprung into my mind, and I frowned.

Last year, I would have unquestioningly agreed with that sentiment, but...

“Well, that’s good to hear,” I said, waving my thoughts away and nonchalantly checking my stock of talismans and amulets. These things didn’t frighten or surprise me anymore, now that I had spent the past year living among spirits. I

felt like I belonged in their world now, and my outlook had been shaped by my time there too.

“Are there any enemies left?” I asked. “I was thinking of maybe going too...”

“Ooh, come! We should check out the foot of the mountain. I don’t think Akamadara can handle everything there on his own,” Ginme said.

“Shinonome and Hakuzosu are probably going to be out for another hour. Come hunt with us!” Kinme added.

“Thanks, guys,” I nodded. “Just thought I should blow off some steam. If I get a little tired, can I trust you guys to have my back?”

The twins looked back at me, their eyes glinting.

“You bet!”

A light chuckle escaped my lips. It was time to forget about pining for a while and put my serious-business cap on.

“All right, let’s go do some training!”

The image of Seigen pinning me down with little effort flashed into my mind. I vowed never to end up in such a disgraceful situation again. If I had the heart to confess my feelings to the girl I loved, I needed to be strong enough to protect her, at the very least.

“You da man, Suimei! Let’s go!”

Kuro jumped up and down. “Me too! I wanna go too!”

I petted him. “Of course. You’re my partner, after all.”

“Hee hee hee!” the Inugami laughed. “Yeah! I can do even more when I’m with you! I can’t wait!”

We all nodded at each other, and we departed the grounds with one leap.

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When we returned to the dilapidated temple and dug into dinner, the sun had already dipped well below the horizon and the air was filled with the cries of the mountain’s insects. There was the occasional clattering and clinking of tableware as we ate without conversation. The Sojobo’s temple had no name of

its own, but it did have a cobwebbed statue of Vaiśravaṇa that would watch over our mealtimes.

“I noticed that you handled quite a lot of spirits today,” said the Sojobo, breaking the silence. “Good work out there.”

“Yeah! We kicked their asses left and right!” Ginme said.

“We all worked very hard today. I’d say our training was a success!” Kinme added.

Despite the twins’ cheeriness, the Sojobo only offered a wry smile in return.

“I’m glad you had a productive day, but we can’t let the mountain be soaked in the spirits’ blood. Their resentment will become bad energy for the land here. I won’t deny that it’s good training, but... Hmm, what to do?”

Then the man sitting beside the Sojobo made his presence known. He was wearing a light brown, single-layered kimono whose expert tailoring could be seen at a single glance. His hair was also brown, albeit streaked with white, and had been neatly combed down. He straightened his back impeccably and turned to the Sojobo.

“Would you perhaps leave this to me, then? I am an exorcist, after all. Purification is my bread and butter,” he offered.

“That would be much appreciated,” the Sojobo said. “However, I believe that you have yet to fully recover...?”

“Don’t worry about me,” the man replied. “I feel embarrassed letting you take such good care of me with nothing in return.”

“Well!” the Sojobo said. “I may take you up on your offer, then.” He grinned, flashing his canines, and the well-dressed man returned a smile.

The man was my father, Shirai Seigen—the very same human who had caused the spirits to plague Mount Kurama so much.

*Yeah, don’t worry, sure.* I rolled my eyes. *Big talk for the guy who created this problem in the first place...*

However, he was here on Shinonome’s request. Sensing that many enemies would be after his head, Shinonome requested that the Sojobo let my father

recuperate under his watch, as the Sojobo retained massive power even in the human world.

The great Tengu king whose name was known all over the nation sure made an unlikely pair with the exorcist who had turned the spirit world against him. Anyone would think that they would gel like oil and water, but they actually got on surprisingly well enough. It certainly helped that the two of them had overlapping interests: Seigen wanted protection while he healed, and the Sojobo had needed funds to repair his aged temple for quite some time now. He would harvest parts from the attacking spirits and sell them to other exorcists for a high price. Now that he had access to Seigen's connections, he was able to earn quite a lot of money. Such was the chemistry between the Tengu king, who saw the exorcist as a way to profit off his own kind, and Seigen, being the man that he was.

I found it quite ironic that Seigen had wreaked so much havoc upon the spirits to create his ideal world, and yet here he was, letting a spirit tend to him now that the tide had turned against him.

Seigen chuckled once he realized I was staring holes into him.

"What is it? Have I got something between my teeth?"

"No," I said. "Just thinking about how fake your smile looks."

"Oh, really?" he said. "That's unfortunate, considering it's the only way I can smile. Ha ha ha!" His chortling only served to aggravate my nerves. I stabbed violently at the pickled radish before me. Then I heard a voice. I could tell that its words were concealing a chuckle.

"Master, I sense that Suimei-sama harbors a plethora of complex emotions within him. I have been told many stories of how boys his age can develop a bit of an attitude. I am sure you have heard the same."

The speaker was the young man who was now pouring tea into Seigen's cup. It was my father's Inugami familiar, Akamadara. He had black hair streaked with highlights as red as his eyes, and he wore a modern, stylish combination of a kimono with a hoodie underneath. Seigen raised an eyebrow and nodded at his loyal hound's words.

“That is true! I also had my fair share of worries when I was Suimei’s age,” he said. “Back then, I felt like I was drowning in despair, without a single ray of light to lead me into the future...”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “You’re spoiling the food with all of your previous teenage angst.”

“Ah ha ha!” he laughed. “Sorry, sorry. Once you get to my age, you just can’t help but talk about the past.”

“Oh my God,” Kinme said. “Spoken like a true old man.”

“Kinme-kun, it still hurts me to be called old, you know...”

There he was, guffawing again.

I couldn’t stand it.

Akamadara was right, though. I was dealing with a lot of inner unrest, all tangled together like a big knot inside. I’d always resented Seigen for forcing me to shove my emotions aside, but when I learned about his past and his feelings during the whole incident, I found myself unable to muster the same hate I’d always harbored. And, to be honest, I was growing unsure of how to act around him now and in the future.

I let a sigh slip out, and Akamadara came over to me. He opened his hand to reveal a paper crane.

“I just remembered, this came to us a moment ago. I believe it’s for *you*, Suimei-sama.”

“Oh...!” I jumped. “Yeah, it is. Thanks.”

It was a letter from Kaori!

Scared I was going to rip it, I delicately unfolded the crane. Its clumsy creases told me that it had been folded and re-folded a number of times. Once I had it spread out, I was greeted by round characters that had been penned with a gentle hand. The writing style was filled with so much of Kaori’s personality that I could practically hear her speaking the sentences that overflowed from the confines of the pages. *She had a lot she wanted to say, huh...?*

One line jumped out at me, and I felt my face grow hot. “It was such a shame

that we didn't get the chance to see each other," it read.

Then Kinme clambered over, sensing a bit of entertainment for him. He peeked over my shoulder and tried to see what I was reading. "Oh ho, is that a letter from Kaori?"

"Hey, no peeking!" I panicked. All of my nerves flared up as I tried to cover the letter.

Kinme's face lit up with a sly air of knowledge. He leaned even closer until his mouth was right beside my ear.

"My, my, my, so you've been writing letters to each other?" he whispered. "You lovebirds are so adorable."

"L-Lovebirds...?!" My cry of protest caught in my throat. "What are you talking about?! Quit trying to bully me. And get off me! You're so heavy!"

"Aww..." Kinme drooped. "But you know, I just can't wait to see you two start dating already!"

"Wha...?!" Stunned, I was only able to blink at him a few times. I hurriedly lowered my voice and asked, "What do you mean? How did you know that I like her?!"

Kinme opened his eyes wider than I'd ever seen them and clasped his head with both hands in a ridiculously dramatic flourish.

"Whaaat?!" he shouted. "Suimei, you *seriously* thought that we couldn't tell? You're sillier than I thought! Man, you really need to get a mirror and see how you act around her! Anybody with eyes can see that you're *madly in love* with Kaori!"

"Hey!" My reflexes kicked into overdrive as I leaped at Kinme to cover his mouth. "Not so loud!"

Kinme kept trying to speak from behind my hand, but I ignored him. Instead, I nervously glanced around the room. Everyone looked back at me with indifference, which made me feel even more tense.

"Oh, I had presumed that you were already seeing each other," Seigen said matter-of-factly. "Akamadara, are they not even dating yet? They're blooming a

little *too* late, wouldn't you say?"

"Shh! Master, you must approach this with more tact, lest your young son be wounded!" Akamadara cautioned.

"Well... You know, it was pretty obvious. Gah ha ha ha!" the Sojobo laughed.

"Sorry, Suimei! Even I could tell!" Kuro yapped.

I felt even more embarrassed as four sets of eyes peered at me with gleeful, knowing looks. Was I really that obvious?! Even Kuro, who usually had his head in the clouds, read me like an open book!

Now I *really* wanted to know how I usually acted around Kaori. However, as I began to think about this, I noticed that one person was having the exact opposite reaction of everyone else's.

"You... You WHAAAAAAAAAAT?!" Ginme yelled. If his eyes opened any wider, their lids would be swallowed whole by their sockets. All the blood had rushed to his face, which was now a deep shade of red, and he was pointing at me with a trembling finger, unable to say much else as his mind flailed about from the news.

He was making me uncomfortable, so I turned away from him.

Then, the Sojobo asked me, "Anyway, what was in Kaori's letter? Did she write anything about the plan for Hakuzosu?"

"Oh." I cleared my throat. "Right."

I took a deep breath and summarized the letter. Kaori had written that she was going to seek the help of Tasaburo-tanuki, Dansaburo-danuki, and the fox spirit Tamamo-no-Mae to convince Hakuzosu.

"Kaori said that she's going with the others to Kagawa tomorrow, to see Tasaburo-tanuki," I said.

I snuck a quick glance at the corner of the temple where Shinonome and Hakuzosu lay unconscious. After they had woken from their earlier fight, they continued their "discussion." As usual, Hakuzosu maintained that he could not allow the bookstore to remain standing, and Shinonome refused to back down from the pride he held for his job. Of course, they were still unable to reach an

understanding, and in the end they drank until they passed out.

“Sojobo... What if we can’t get Shinonome and Hakuzosu to see eye to eye?”

The protector of Mount Kurama hummed, deep in thought, and stroked his long beard with one hand.

“I can only see things getting worse,” he said. “Hakuzosu would most likely command his army to storm the bookstore, and Shinonome would strike back with everything he has. Even Nurarihyon might be forced to step in. Anyway, whatever happens, I think we can all agree that it will only end in flames for the bookstore and its surrounding area.”

“No...!” I shook my head. “But that bookstore is so important to Kaori!”

“Even so...” the Sojobo shrugged. “Sometimes violence is the only answer.”

“That’s nonsense!” I retorted. “There has to be another way!”

Sometimes, I really hated how tunnel-visioned spirits could be. Things were going nowhere this way!

“...I’m sorry, but I may have to leave here for a while,” I said.

“Oh?” the Sojobo raised an eyebrow. “Weren’t you going to stay until your father recovered?”

I nodded. “That was what I thought, but some new business has come up. I’ve decided to help Kaori with her plan. Please, would you be able to keep Hakuzosu here until we’re ready? I’ll send frequent updates, and if he and Shinonome seem to be reaching the breaking point, I want you to send me a letter immediately too.”

“Sure, I don’t mind,” the Sojobo said.

Hearing my plan, Seigen approached me. “If you must go, then take these.” He held a thick stack of talismans out to me. “You’re running low because of all the training you’ve been doing, right?”

“...Is there a catch?” I studied Seigen, trying to spot any signs of foul play, but he only chuckled brightly.

“What? I just feel like you should have them. Can’t a dad care for his son? And



anyway, I owe Kaori-kun quite a bit too. I want to help her out of her troubles in any way I can.”

I wrinkled my brows and continued to glare suspiciously at the talismans. My unwillingness to let Seigen help me was battling with my knowledge of how long it would take to make my own talismans...

“Fine, I suppose I’ll take them just in case,” I grumbled, snatching the stack from him. “Thanks, I guess, *old man*.”

“Pfft...!” he spurted suddenly. “Ah ha ha ha! Ouch! Not you too, Suimei!”

I ignored his attempt at friendliness and tucked the talismans away into my bag.

As soon as I shut it, a deafening shriek pierced the air.

“WAAAAAAIT A MINUUUUUUUUUTE!!!”

“Ginme, what’s wrong? Calm down.”

“WHAT?!” he continued to scream. “How can I calm down? Suimei likes Kaori? *SINCE WHEN?!?*”

The spirit gripped my shoulders and began to shake me like a rag doll, tears leaking all over his face.

“Why didn’t you tell meeeeeee?!” he wailed. “Am I the only one who had no idea?!”

“Well, um...” I stammered. “I only just realized recently...”

Ginme wasn’t having any of it. “Recently, schmecently! I’ve liked Kaori since I was a tiny little Tengu!”

As the words left his mouth, the realization that his love had remained unrequited for so many years hit him like a ton of bricks. He scrunched his eyes shut and hung his head.

“I liked her first, dammit... And I even told you not to get any ideas.”

“Er, Ginme...” I tried. He wasn’t sounding like himself, and I was starting to get a little worried. Suddenly, he whipped his head upward and shouted.

“IT’S ON!”

“What’s on?” I said, confused by his outburst.

“Let’s see who can convince Dansaburo-danuki to help us first. Whoever succeeds gets Kaori!” the Tengu declared.

“Whaaat?!” I exclaimed, blinking at him in shock, watching and waiting for the punchline. “You’re joking,” I said with a laugh, hoping that he would respond the same way.

But there was no punchline. “I’m not,” he said. “Fight me, Suimei.” His eyes were pale, cold as the moon, and dead serious. There was no humor in his voice.

I nodded quietly. “All right,” I said. “Sure.” I had a feeling that he wouldn’t budge unless I accepted.

Ginme’s face softened with relief, and he pressed a fist to my chest.

“Get ready to lose,” he said. He sounded more serious than I’d ever heard him. I had to return the energy, at least.

“*You* get ready to lose,” I said.

Thus, the battle for Kaori was on!

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Before we departed, I steeled myself for just how intense the competition for Kaori was going to be. It was a fierce battle that I had to win at *any* cost. I told myself that I couldn’t let my guard down just because Kaori had confessed to me instead of Ginme.

This wasn’t just about our love; it was about my pride too.

And yet...

“Ahh, hot water really just hits different, huh, Ginme? I love me a pipin’ hot bath!” said Kinme.

“Not only that, but we can see all across the Sea of Japan here!” said Ginme. “So freakin’ awesome. Right, Kuro? Suimei?”

“I want to stay here forever...” the Inugami murmured.

I said nothing in return. And anyway, how did we end up in an open-air bath

like this...?

*What are we doing...?* I sank deeper into the onsen's depths, blowing bubbles on the way down. I looked up above and watched the summer sky waver in all directions through the water over my head. *Same*, I thought. *I feel the same right now.*

The chlorinated water snuck into my mouth, and I winced a little at its vaguely salty, chemical taste. *I deserve that for being such a fool.* I closed my eyes slowly and thought about the events leading up to our arrival on Sado Island.

On the day that I resolved to help Kaori with her plan, I sent her another letter. I spent the entire next day getting rid of the spirits that were going after Seigen, so we had a bit of a buffer. Kuro, the Tengu twins, and I were only able to head toward our destination the day after that. Sado Island was situated in the sea next to Niigata Prefecture and was the home of Dansaburo-danuki, one of the Three Great Tanuki of Japan. This spirit was the supreme commander of the tanuki of Sado Island, and just like any tanuki, many tales were told about his human transformations. If someone were to ask me what made him different from the others, I would probably say that it was that he ran a business lending money to humans.

Dansaburo-danuki was a lot wealthier than most people, having earned a great fortune from at least one of the old mines in Sado. He wasn't always well loved, having been the victim of a few assassination attempts, but that didn't stop him from harboring a strong sense of duty and virtue.

We were lost on how to approach and persuade a tanuki like him, so before we left, we had the Sojobo tell us everything he could about Dansaburo-danuki. Who knew that they were drinking buddies from way back?

"He's a good fellow with a solid moral code," the Sojobo said. "Otherwise, he wouldn't be the boss of Sado like he is now. He does gamble and drink, but he treats the women in his life well and would never hesitate to lend a helping hand to anyone who needs it. He's got the compassion to lend money to humans with no interest, but that generosity of his sometimes comes back to bite him."

We were assured that we probably wouldn't have much trouble getting him on board, but one thing was weighing on my mind.

"He does have one bad habit, though," the Sojobo said. "Has to, otherwise, he'd be perfect."

I had a bad feeling when I learned what this habit was, but all we could do was head to Sado Island and meet the tanuki ourselves. Things weren't going to be easy, however—it seemed that we were going to experience firsthand what the Sojobo had shared with us.

We first met Dansaburo-danuki at the Futatsuiwa Shrine, where he was deified. It was nestled in the depths of a serene forest and hosted both red and white torii gates that stretched on in endless tunnels, not unlike the Fushimi Inari Shrine located in Kyoto.

As we advanced deeper into the greenery illuminated by patchy sunlight, we were suddenly met by something unnerving in the air. For some reason, the entrance to the small shrine was overrun with stones: broad, flat ones that could be found anywhere. They were all about the same size and had been stacked into towers that littered the ground. And before them sat a sole tanuki who neither made a single sound nor moved a single muscle.

*"He does have one bad habit, though. Has to, otherwise, he'd be perfect."*

A chill ran down my spine as I recalled the Sojobo's words. I took a deep breath and called out to the figure.

"Excuse me! Sorry to disturb you, but might you be Dansaburo-danuki...?"

He snapped his head toward our direction the moment I finished my question. "That I am, boy," Dansaburo-danuki answered sharply.

My eyes went wide. I wasn't sure what I had expected, but it definitely wasn't this. He wore a zukin hood and a suzukake top—complete with arm and leg coverings—and straw sandals on his feet. He was dressed exactly like a mountain ascetic: I almost expected him to whip out a conch shell too.

I snuck a shifty glance at Kinme and Ginme. They also dressed in a similar way,

so I thought that maybe this was one of their jokes, but they shook their heads at me vigorously in a silent plea of innocence.

*Well... I'll just talk to Dansaburo-danuki first.*

I quickly explained why we had come here, but as soon as I had finished...

"My boy, I apologize, but I swore never again to practice deception upon the human race, and I plan on following that ethos," he declined, flat and final.

"Oh, um... Is that so? Could I ask why, if you don't mind?" I tried to force my most approachable smile, but the tanuki simply put his hands together as if in prayer, his face unmoving.

"It is simply because I have decided to lead a pious life instead."

"Pious...? In what way?"

"I spent much of my life tricking and deceiving humans," he said. "I have performed a few good deeds, but they are pitiful compared to those of Tasaburo of Yashima. I have lived a long, long life now, and I must contemplate the hereafter. I have chosen to renounce moneylending and instead give the rest of my fortune to the humans. Once I have naught left but my own self, I shall live out my days doing as much good as I can."

"Right..." I nodded, unsure what to make of his words. Dansaburo-danuki then closed his eyes, and his tone turned grave.

"Unless you gentlemen wish to be cast into Hell once you have passed, it would be in your best interest to contribute as much good as you can while you remain among the living. Renounce the drink, refrain from gambling, and practice celibacy. Then, you may hope to somewhat lighten the burden of your sins. May we stay pure of mind, free of defilements. Nanmandabu... Lotus join hands now, for a sutra for the heart and stomach... Raaaaamen!" He bellowed something that sounded vaguely like a chant, and without another word, he turned his back to us.

Surrounded by his stone towers, he put his hands together and began to meditate.

Once we had left Dansaburo-danuki to his devices, we started trying to process what had just happened.

“Was that...meant to be some sort of sutra? I couldn’t tell if he was trying to be Buddhist or Shintoist. I guess the lotus sort of makes sense, but then he said something about noodles?”

As I was grappling to make sense of it all, the twins burst out into raucous laughter, clutching their stomachs.

“Lotus join hands now, for a sutra for the heart and stomach... Raaaaamen’?! If anything, he’s going to Hell for that!”

“Ahhh ha ha ha! And why does he talk like that? What century does he think we’re in?”

“It *is* all a bit strange...” I said. “To be honest, he seems to be wearing that outfit for the heck of it, like he’s trying to cosplay as a mountain ascetic.”

“*Cosplay?!!*” the Tengu wheezed and doubled over. That seemed to break them completely. They started rolling about on the ground as tears streamed from their eyes, but as they carried on, I began to sense that there was something bigger at play.

“This is all a bit too suspicious. Is there someone else influencing him, or has he got something to hide...?” I pondered.

Kinme seemed to overhear my muttering, and his eyes lit up. “Then I guess whoever gets to the bottom of this wins!”

“You’re right about that!” Ginme said. “I’m sure whoever finds out what he’s really up to will also be able to get him on board. I guess that’s what our battle will come down to.”

“...Right,” I said. However, now that I thought about it, the Sojobo’s description didn’t seem to line up with what we’d seen today. He’d said that, despite the drinking and gambling, Dansaburo-danuki had a strong moral code and treated women with respect. And why did he bring up *celibacy*, of all things? Was there some deeper meaning to it? How did this link to his decision to lead a pious life...?

As I made a mental note to investigate this further, I noticed that the twins had grabbed on to my arms from both sides. Even before I turned to glare at them, I could tell that they were up to no good...and there it was, the cheeky twinkle in their eyes.

“Forgot about all that for now. It’s been a long day, huh?”

“And here we are, out on beautiful Sado Island!”

“You know we’re here on *business*, right?” I sighed, although I had a feeling I knew how they were going to answer. Sure enough, they beamed at me and nodded, completely aware of what they were suggesting. Struck by their brazenness, I remembered that when we had gone to Shizuoka to placate the Daidarabotchi by reading him a picture book, these two Tengu had gone to an amusement park to kill time. I didn’t know why I’d expected any more from them.

“Get serious, guys. And what about our match? Are you just going to let me win?” I asked.

“Whaaat? What has that got to do with this?” Ginme said. “We gotta play when we gotta play! The match can wait till tomorrow. I wanna go gold-panning or something!”

“Yeah, yeah!” Kinme interjected. “Besides, if we go in without a solid plan, we’re only going to end up hurting ourselves. And who says we can’t have a bit of fun on the side while we gather our intel? We could go have a relaxing bath in one of those onsens here!”

“You guys...” I geared myself up for a lecture as my irritation got the better of me, until I sensed a pair of glowing red eyes watching us from the grass.

“Did... Did someone say onsen...?” The eyes emerged, revealing Kuro. Tanuki saw dogs as their natural enemies, so I had made Kuro hide in order to avoid upsetting Dansaburo-danuki. Now he emerged, tempted by the allure of a hot bath.

“Suimei...” his paws pressed softly into the earth as he approached me, putting on his best imploring puppy-dog eyes. “I’m not too good with water, but I really want to try an onsen...”

“Gck...!” I was finding it hard to withstand his pleading. Come to think of it, I’d never taken him to a hot spring before. As Kuro’s tail waved back and forth, I felt my resistance crumbling and sank into a squat.

“So, you want to go to an onsen?” I asked, and the Inugami lit up like a switch had been flicked.

“Yeah, I do! I’ve always wanted to check one out!”

*Then I guess I have no choice...*

I heaved myself back up and looked to the twins.

“It’s onsen time. Find a place that will allow dogs!”

“Yes, sir!”

So now, not only was I stuck in a battle for Kaori, but I was also neck-deep in a hot spring. I could ask myself over and over how things had ended up this way.

But I already knew the answer—

I did this to myself.

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Finding an open-air bath that allowed us to bring my dog was nothing short of a miracle. Kuro, who was soaking in a large wooden basin, was loving his first hot spring experience.

“Pheew! If there’s a heaven on earth, then this is it, eh, Suimei?”

“You might be right,” I said. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.” But while Kuro was lounging contently in his basin, I was trapped with the regrets in my head.

“I’m still so immature...” I muttered to myself as I watched the Tengu twins splashing water at each other. At that moment, they were transformed into their human forms. Their feathers and avian feet disappeared until they were indistinguishable from any regular person you’d find on the street.

*Hrmph...* I looked down at my own body. It was pale and thin, even more so next to the twins. Ginme was especially well built as a result of his daily training in the mountains, with the curves of his toned muscles accentuating his tan,



sun-kissed skin. No doubt he could woo anyone he wanted with that stunning physique.

*I wonder if Kaori's into that...?*

I stopped myself before I could fall into that rabbit hole. There was no point asking myself something that only she would know the answer to.

I submerged myself in the water again. It took me a few seconds to notice that Kinme was staring right at me with a grin on his face.

"...What?"

"Oh, noooooothing," he said. "Just kinda looks like you're enjoying yourself here. Man, can you imagine the old you doing all this?"

I darted my eyes away, a little embarrassed that he had seen right through me. Even though I wasn't having the cheeriest of thoughts, I was still feeling happier than not.

"I was just thinking about how I'd like to change," I said before I could stop myself. Kinme was taken off guard and raised his eyebrows.

"Oh? Like how?"

"I guess I'd like to be more spontaneous like you guys," I replied. "I feel like if Kaori were here, she would've encouraged me to have fun like you did too. That's just my guess, though."

Kaori was the kind of girl who always remembered the importance of letting loose, after all. I was sure that even in Kagawa, she would find a way to do some sightseeing while on business.

"Now that I've decided to live in the spirit world, I want to stop being so quick to judge spirits' way of doing things. You know, put myself in their shoes more."

I gazed into the distance at the sprawling view of the Sea of Japan and the waves that disappeared into the horizon. As I paused to listen to the lapping of the water, I took a moment to appreciate its beauty, letting the gentle rhythm soothe me. I hadn't always been mindful enough to stop and appreciate the little things. Back when my emotions were still being suppressed, I had as much interest in looking out into nature as I had in staring at a wall.

“Now that I’ve been pulled out of the world I was trapped in, I’ve been overwhelmed by just how much my opinion and point of view has expanded. I’ve only just recently been able to realize how lucky I was, so I want to learn even more about the world around me and develop the compassion to be open-minded about whatever comes my way.”

And I wasn’t afraid to admit that Kaori deserved that type of person too. She was entitled to have people who were strong like that in her life; people like Shinonome, whose strength was undoubtedly part of what made her admire him so.

“And I want to better myself for Kuro too. He grew up in the same oppressive environment as I did, so I want to be able to help him make up for lost time. He’s put his life on the line many times for me, so it’s only fair that I do whatever I can to pay him back,” I said.

Kinme chuckled. He was now a lot closer by my side than I had realized.

“Oh, we have a lot more in common than I thought,” he said. “You’re so cute, like a little baby bird!” He started clapping my back—hard—in an attempt at encouragement, but I felt like I was about to have all the oxygen knocked out of my lungs.

“Ow! Stop... Stop doing that, you idiot!” I coughed. I glared at Kinme, but he remained unperturbed in his glee.

“It’s interesting just how much someone can change once they fall in love. Fascinating stuff!”

“What are you, a sociologist now? What about you, huh?” I shot back.

“Love is for the weak,” he returned with a blasé shrug.

I narrowed my eyes at him, but there was no malice in his smile.

“People only fall in love when they’re soft enough to seek out another person’s warmth when they’re lonely and when they admit that they want to stay with the object of their affection forever. Love is just what happens when the weak of heart flock to each other, like birds of a feather,” Kinme said. “I don’t think I could ever do it, but I still think it’s quite a nice thing.”

I let his words echo in my mind. It just didn't feel right to speak when he was revealing something from deep inside of him like this.

The Tengu chuckled softly and tilted his head.

"Hm? Where's Ginme?" he asked.

I looked around, not seeing the other Tengu anywhere. When did he leave the bath?

I turned to Kinme, and he turned to me. Then we both hurried out of the water.

After I had dried myself off and gotten dressed, I left to search for Ginme. I went to a relatively unpopulated beach. The sea beside me was blinding with moonlight, and not a single cloud marred the sky. The stillness seemed to have lulled the waters to sleep. There were no squawking seagulls to be heard, and no wind brushed against my skin. I felt like I had been transported to another world when I saw how pristine and clear this beach was compared to the Tokyo Bay I was used to seeing. Supposedly, there was a sea-bathing spot around here that had been awarded two Michelin stars, but it was still a little too early in the year for that.

"Where'd he go...?" I muttered.

Although Ginme had seemingly vanished from the hot springs, he was a grown Tengu, not a lost child. There was probably nothing to worry about, but it just wasn't like him to leave without a word. That was what made me feel something wasn't right.

And apparently Kinme thought the same. His expression had darkened, and he had gone off somewhere. Kuro was the only one who remained at our lodgings, sleeping off his post-hot-bath dizziness.

Something white and fluttering distracted me from my thoughts. It was a crane letter! I reached my hand out, and it plopped into my palm. I stroked its head with a finger to say thanks.

I found some nearby steps to sit on so I could read the letter. Sure enough, as

I unfolded it, I was greeted with the familiar sight of Kaori's handwriting.

*Thanks for the letter, it read. We're going to go talk to Tasaburo-tanuki tomorrow. As plain as that opening was, I could tell that she had been in a happy mood when she wrote it.*

*Kagawa's a really nice place. The food is delicious, and I'm having such a great time traveling around with girls my age. I've never done that before! We took a detour to Kotohira-gu, and Tamaki-san got super sweaty climbing the stairs. He wouldn't stop complaining the whole way up. I thought he was going to curse me or something! But I bought a good luck charm, so I think I'll be fine. I bought one for you too! I'll give it to you next time we see each other.*

"Wow, that sounds really tough," I said. *My thoughts and prayers to Tamaki-san for being talked into climbing Kotohira-gu, really.*

And it seemed like I was right about Kaori taking the time to go sightseeing in Kagawa. Even then, she was following whatever her heart wanted.

*Tomorrow's our stand-off with Tasaburo-tanuki. To be honest, I was starting to think that I was doing everything wrong until your letter came. Before that, I couldn't stop feeling really annoyed at myself, and I spent most of the night looking out into the dark sea, wondering what I should do.*

I cast my eyes to the sapphire sea, its waters clear like glass. I can only imagine how much more anxious staring at a dark ocean would have made her feel.

I returned to the letter.

*You gave me all the bravery I needed to tackle this head-on.*

After this line, I could see a few stray ink marks, like she had paused to think about what to write next. Then, after a paragraph break, Kaori continued the rest of her message.

*You're always giving me the hand I need to pull myself up, aren't you? You gave me the strength to keep my head up high, so I'll give tomorrow everything I've got. It'll probably all be over by the time you get this letter, though.*

*But honestly, thank you so much, Suimei.*

*From Kaori.*

“Oh...!” My heart skipped a beat and, as if moving on their own, my hands quickly folded up the letter. Something began to stir in my chest, low and slow and warm. I’d written that letter to Kaori thinking it was just a regular message, but it ended up being the support that she needed to lean on. Somehow, that made me want to jump and shout for joy, but also curl up in embarrassment. I felt like I could almost burst from all the emotions boiling over inside of me.

*“If only you hadn’t been born. You... You took Midori from me!”*

As my father’s curses flashed through my mind, I felt only peace. That probably meant their hold on me was weakening as I truly started to believe that I could stay here, where I wanted to be, because I wanted it and because there were other people who wanted me to stay.

I was allowed to just...live my life.

I felt a soft thud beside me as someone sat down.

“Man, Suimei...”

I recognized that voice. I turned in surprise and, sure enough, I was met with a pair of surly silver eyes.

“Ginme!” I cried, shocked that the one I’d been searching for all day had appeared out of thin air.

“It’s really so obvious when you’re thinking about Kaori. Your face goes all funny and stuff,” the Tengu said, resting his sulky face in his hands.

“What happened to you?” I asked. “Kinme was really worried, you know. Why did you run off?”

“Ew, stop being so nice to me,” Ginme grimaced. “I don’t think you should be allowed to do that. You gotta sound meaner! Go scowl and say, like, ‘I’m not here to make friends’ or something, like a lone wolf!”

“Huh?” I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, that’s what you were like when we first met, right?” he replied.

“What? Really?” I gawped in disbelief.

Ginme shrugged incredulously like he'd just been wrongfully booed. "Jeez, self-unaware much?"

"Er, sorry," I said. "I spent all my energy making sure I didn't show any emotions, so..."

Having been forced to suppress my emotions, I had grown to hate my own face. I always felt disgusted by how blank I looked, like a corpse, so I never thought about what I usually looked like.

"I didn't mean to upset you," I fidgeted. "I'll try not to show anything on my face if that'll help?"

Ginme's face flushed. "I-I didn't say that! I like you even when your face is doing backflips or whatever! Just stay the way you are! Stop being weird about it!"

"Oh," I said. "Okay. That's good."

But then, why did he get mad at me? As I mulled it over, Ginme heaved an enormous sigh that rattled in his throat.

"Jeez, what the hell is this?" he muttered. "He does that clueless airhead act so well, it's not fair...! I bet Kaori's seen him do all those different expressions up close too. No wonder she..."

"Um, Ginme? Are you okay?" I asked, worried at the amount of mumbling he was doing to himself.

He puffed his cheeks at me. "I'm fine," he said.

"Are you sure? You've been acting weird all day. First you run away mid-bath, and now this."

"That's... That's because...!" he burst out. "I just got pissed 'cause you went and had that epic monologue!" He exhaled hard out of his nostrils.

"Gaaaaaahhh! Why are you such a good guy?! I'm so mad!"

"Uh, thanks? Excuse me?" I couldn't tell if I was meant to be flattered or insulted.

The Tengu huffed, his face red as a tomato. He jabbed a trembling finger at me.

“You’re... You’re going down tomorrow, I swear!” he shouted.

I couldn’t help but smile at how dramatic he was being, and I chuckled. “You’re not going to beat me so easily. Let’s both do our best, huh?”

“Gaaaaaaah! I told you, stop being so nice! Stupid! *Stupiiiiiiiiidd!!!*”

“Jeez, what am I, your verbal punching bag?” I frowned.

“Ooh! There it is!” Ginme beamed. “That’s the Suimei I know! The man who’s never too shy to show his displeasure to the world!”

“Was that supposed to be a compliment?” My eyebrows crinkled even further, but Ginme’s smile only widened. Then it suddenly fell.

“Um, anyway, I’m gonna go. You, me, battle of the century tomorrow. Got it?!” he jabbered as something came over his face—something that looked like fear. His eyes shifted about, and then he finally took off into the sky with a weighty flap of his wings. Wondering what he’d seen, I followed him with my eyes as he got smaller and smaller and saw a shadow chasing after him. Bolts of lightning began to streak through the sky, although not a cloud was in sight. Then came a rumbling and a blinding flash. Smoke began to rise from Ginme as his body went limp, and he plummeted to the earth below. He’d been struck!

“Gin—!” I panicked, and my body instinctively tried to rush to him, but then I realized who the shadow was. His hands were firmly on his hips, and he looked positively furious.

It was Kinme.

“I’m glad *he’s* not my older brother,” I sighed.

*I just hope he’ll be fine for our match tomorrow,* I thought as I turned on my heel. I snuck a peek at my letter and smiled. *What should I write in my reply?* As I began to imagine Kaori reading it, a little tune began to drift from my lips.

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Dansaburo-danuki had many workers under him, including a particularly notorious group of tanuki known as the Four Heavenly Kings. One of them was his wife, Seki-no-Sabuto. I decided to pay her a visit with Kuro the next day, as I was still concerned about what Dansaburo-danuki had said about celibacy. The

twins had headed off elsewhere with their own plan for the battle in mind, but all I knew was that they were going to do some scouting on their own. In the grounds of the Samuto Shrine, cedar trees that twisted like serpents lined the path we walked, as if they were guardians of the shrine itself. Once we were able to worm through the massive branches, we finally spotted the cavern where Seki-no-Sabuto was said to live.

“Have you come about something related to Dansaburo?” a voice asked as a raccoon dog emerged. I had imagined Sabuto as quite the gallant tanuki, since she was one of the Four Heavenly Kings, but she looked far more ordinary than what I had envisioned. The one thing that set her apart from her more beastly counterparts was that she wore a striped kimono.

“More than five years have passed since he devoted himself to a life of piety, and since then, he has never strayed from his commitment to leading an honest and virtuous life. He seldom visits me anymore, having sworn to cast away all worldly desires so he may go to Sukhavati, the Land of Bliss,” she said.

“That’s... I’m sorry to hear that,” I said. So Dansaburo-danuki had abandoned his wife after all. I closed my mouth before the thought could spill out, but Sabuto only shook her head gently.

“Do not worry for me. I have spent much of my life with him and know that he is prone to these odd whims. Once, he sequestered himself away in the mountains in a bid to revive the gold mines here as he yearned for the hustle and bustle of the days of old,” she said.

“He’s...determined, all right,” I remarked.

“Yes, he has an overabundance of compassion in his heart,” she nodded. “And not enough brains, if you ask me.”

“You sound like you’ve been through a lot,” I said.

She replied, calm as ever, “Well, it is what happens when you are a hopeless romantic like me. Our children have long since left the nest, so his bouts of flightiness do not affect us as much as you may imagine.”

I nodded. “I see...”

Did staying married to the same person for so long make everyone this zen?



Sabuto was still as collected and unflappable as she'd been the moment we met, so I decided to ask her more questions.

"Did anything out of the ordinary happen five years ago?"

"Yes, there was a great flood. Many tanuki saw their homes washed away. I remember Dansaburo running around and trying to give as much aid as possible. After that, his strange behavior began," Sabuto explained.

*A flood... I thought. Did anything else happen during the flood?*

Something about Sabuto's face told me I could be honest with her, so I decided to tell her why I was here.

"I think your husband's hiding something," I said. "I only just met him for the first time, but I think he's keeping something to himself. This might just sound like some conspiracy to you, but if you have any idea of what it could be, please tell me."

Sabuto fell silent as she ran over my words in her head, then slowly closed her eyes. The whole space was so quiet that the only audible sound was the rustling of the leaves. The tanuki opened her mouth again, her face illuminated in patches by the dappled sunlight. I waited with bated breath for her to speak, and when she finally opened her eyes again, she looked directly into mine.

"Dansaburo has always been fearful of Hell and the afterlife. When I asked him why, he said that he was influenced by the many mountain ascetics who lived on Sado Island during its heyday as a place rich with gold. As he watched them conduct their religious ceremonies and preach the word of Buddha, he also heard many stories of how sinners were punished."

"So, you're saying he acts the way he does because he's afraid of being punished in death?" I asked.

She bowed. "Correct. Even when I tell him that Hell is a human concept that does not pertain to us beasts, he refuses to listen. He has tried many a method to alleviate his sins. He forces himself to do good, and since the flood five years ago, he has become even more driven."

So Dansaburo-danuki feared what comes after mortal death, even though he was a spirit! *That* was why he acted the way he did! Residents of the spirit

world seldom feared death, if at all, because they knew that if they died, they would be reincarnated anyway. It was a stark reminder for me that one's faith and values are shaped by their environment. Dansaburo-danuki, who was born and raised on Sado Island, believed wholeheartedly in the preaching of its mountain ascetics. However, this still didn't explain why his actions were so extreme.

"It's fine if Dansaburo-danuki wants to discipline himself and atone for his sins, but I think he's gone a step too far by casting you aside. I mean, you're his wife! You raised children together and stayed with each other through thick and thin. You should be the most important thing in the world to him! How can he just do this to you?" My anger spilled out before I could stop myself, but Sabuto only giggled.

"My, you are a sincere young man, aren't you? Whoever has your love and devotion is sure to be a lucky one," she said.

I blushed. "Wha—"

Sabuto smiled gently and nodded. "However, it is as you say. He is being ruled by his fear." As she admitted this, she turned to me and bowed.

"I suspect that five years ago, he committed a sin that he found tremendously grave, and this drove him to cling so much to the teachings of the Buddha. No doubt it keeps him up at night too. Please, I implore you to find out what his secret is and make him come back to his senses," she pleaded.

After I said goodbye to Sabuto, I left the shrine. Kuro appeared from the spot where he had been hiding in. Having witnessed the entire conversation, he looked at me with worried eyes.

"Suimei...?" he said.

Although I could hear him, I was too preoccupied with what Sabuto had told me: that Dansaburo-danuki feared being punished in Hell more than anything else. What seemed like his whimsy was actually the result of his intense anxieties surrounding sins and sinning. Everything he did—giving out interest-free loans, giving people directions, casting his beloved wife aside, and reciting

absurd sutras—was all so he could mitigate his sins. As strange as his behavior was, he had his reasons for acting the way he did.

“But then, what’s up with those stacks of stones we saw? What did he build them for?” I wondered out loud.

Did he believe that piling those flat stones one on top of the other in front of his shrine could also contribute to his atonement? What did it all mean? I knew that the reason why he changed five years ago probably lay in the events of the flood Sabuto mentioned, but what exactly was it?

The more I racked my brain, the more lost I felt. I was missing a very crucial piece of the puzzle, but I couldn’t figure out what it was.

I reached my arms up and stretched, thinking that I needed to hit the brakes on this train of thought for just a little bit.

As soon as I had moved, I noticed there was quite a bit of noise in the space around me—noise in the form of bird calls. I looked up and saw an abnormally large flock of birds in the sky. It was so big that it looked like a massive hole in the sky.

“Yo, Suimei!” a familiar voice called. “How’d things go on your end?”

The Tengu twins fell from above and landed right in front of me, and the flock dispersed. It was impressive how these Crow Tengu could command so many birds.

“Oh, it’s you guys,” I said. “I did get my hands on some info, so not too bad.”

“Oh, okay, cool,” Ginme replied. “Info, huh...”

He seemed antsy and kept glancing at me, like there was something he wanted to say. No, it was more like he wanted me to ask him about it. Jeez, he could be so annoying sometimes. However, I kept my mouth closed because I didn’t want to take his bait like this.

But it seemed that I wouldn’t have to anyway, because Kinme broke the silence.

“Guess what, Suimei? We found something that’s gonna make us win for sure!” he said gleefully.

“Dammit, Kinme!” Ginme groaned. “Don’t spill the beans!”

“Sorry, man!” his twin laughed. “As if Suimei’s gonna fall for your crappy bait!”

Harsh, but true. Ginme sulked and pouted at his brother.

*Jeez, what a child...*

“So, what’s this proof of yours? Is it that ball of fur you’ve got there?” I pointed at the fuzzy animal that lay helplessly in Ginme’s arms, and the Tengu’s face lit up like a firework. The animal appeared to be a tanuki—and yes, to be honest, I was a little curious about it.

“Yep, that’s right. We asked all the birds on the island to do a little scouting for us and find out more about Dansaburo-danuki’s routine, including the places he visits the most. We sure uncovered something really interesting!” Ginme said. He prodded the animal in his arms. “Hey, come say hi.”

The tanuki looked up at us. She was a tiny thing, a lot smaller than Sabuto was.

“Um, nice to meet you,” she said. “My name is Takahashi Oroku...”

I squinted at the quivering creature, and Ginme grinned in triumph.

“Hey, Suimei, did you know that raccoon dogs mate for life?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’ve heard something about that,” I said.

“Dansaburo-danuki’s wife is called Seki-no-Sabuto, and they get along so well that the caverns at each of their shrines are apparently connected by a tunnel,” Ginme continued.

“I just met her, actually.” I told him. “She’s been with Dansaburo-danuki for so long that she’s used to him doing weird things like this. Nothing seemed to phase her. They haven’t seen each other in a while, though.”

“Huh,” Ginme said. “But I guess his wife just doesn’t do it for him anymore or something. Maybe he likes ’em younger and hotter?”

I wasn’t expecting to hear that. “What do you mean?” I asked in surprise. Ginme seemed to enjoy seeing this kind of reaction from me.

“See, this tanuki here lives at a bridge that stretches over the Ono River, called the Takahashi Bridge. And guess who goes there every day? Our good friend Dansaburo-danuki!”

“What? In that weird getup of his?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Kinme replied. “He sure is keen about the place, huh?”

“Hmm, I see.” I tried to remain calm in front of the Tengu, but I was feeling a little giddy inside at this revelation. The Ono River, its bridge, the home situated right in this location, Oroku, and the grave sin Dansaburo-danuki had committed... I was getting so close to the full picture.

I asked Ginme, who was still looking smug, the final question I needed.

“So, you think Dansaburo-danuki is having an affair with this lady tanuki here?”

Ginme’s face brightened even more, like an entire fireworks show. He rubbed his nose proudly.

“You got it exactly right! The reason why he’s acting so weird is that he’s trying to divert prying eyes away from his affair!”

Ginme cackled and pointed a finger at me. “Get ready to kiss this battle goodbye, Suimei! ...Hey, are you listening to me?” he moped when he realized that I was not paying him any attention but watching Oroku instead.

She flinched as I drew my face closer to hers, but when I whispered my question, the fear disappeared and she snapped her eyes to mine, nodding vigorously. Her round eyes became wet with tears.

“I thought so,” I said.

All the dots had now been connected. I gave a satisfied nod to Oroku and noticed that Ginme was still looking at me with a sullen scowl.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing,” he huffed. “Just that my brilliant deduction flew right over your head, and then you started whispering about whatever. Where’s my dramatic surprised gasp?!”

I shrugged. "What are you, five?"

"Oh, shut up. I was so sure you were gonna be super shocked at this. Can you blame me?!" Ginme's shoulders drooped, crestfallen. "Tch. No reaction means no dice, huh? I was way off the mark with my deduction..."

"Huh. You sure gave up quickly," I said.

"I ain't got the biggest brain in the world!" Ginme cried. "Whatever theory you come up with is gonna be more right than mine, duh!"

I blinked. I hadn't expected him to be so honest. "You don't think that I could be wrong too?"

Ginme blinked back. "Why would you be? As if you'd come up with a wrong theory."

"I don't know if you should trust me that much, but okay..." I laughed nervously. Ginme still looked befuddled as he rubbed his head.

"Well, I mean, Kaori likes you, doesn't she? She's gotta fall in love with someone at least as smart as you, yeah?"

"Wait, hold on," I shook my head. "What? Say that first sentence again?"

Did this mean that Ginme knew how Kaori felt all this time?

Realizing what he had said, Ginme fell silent and turned back to me.

"I didn't know *you* liked her, but... I've always had my eyes on Kaori, so I noticed the moment she started looking at you differently," he said. He swallowed like it hurt to say those words, and in that moment, he looked smaller than ever.

"The moment I found out you liked Kaori, I realized I stood no chance. I knew I was fighting a losing battle. I mean, how do you win against requited love?"

He ran a hand through his hair in frustration and glanced at me.

"I challenged you because I was desperate, but I still ended up losing anyway..." he said weakly. "There's no point in fighting this to the end. You win, Suimei." He waved a hand at me and walked off.

He seemed okay with dropping the fight for Kaori, but it felt wrong for things

to end this way. I stormed over to him and tightly grabbed his shoulder.

“What are you, trying to leave the scene like some tragic hero or something? You’re such an idiot,” I said. Ginme halted in his tracks and opened his mouth in protest, but he stopped before any words came out.

“How can you just give up on Kaori like this without even telling her how you feel?” My heart was racing. I couldn’t think clearly enough to figure out if this was the best way of doing it, but something told me that I had to make my feelings clear here. As precious as Kaori was to me, this goofball Tengu was too.

“I’m sorry for confessing to her first even though I knew you liked her before me, I really am. But I just couldn’t bear to deny my feelings any longer,” I apologized. Then I returned the very words Ginme had said to me when I first came to the spirit world:

“Hey, Ginme. Kaori’s an incredible woman, isn’t she? There’s no one else like her.”

He began to tremble.

“Of course she is,” he said. “Kaori, she... She really is incredible. That’s exactly why I fell for her.” He finally turned his face to me, slowly. It was covered entirely in messy tears, and his nose was running.

“You look like you could use a tissue,” I said.

“Shut up,” he sniffed. “You don’t have to say it out loud. I feel so pathetic. I want to just curl up and die.”

“Oh no, we can’t have that,” I said.

Ginme hiccupped, and a small smile began to spread across his face.

“Jeez, you got me good. You always do...”

He seemed content, like all the doubts in his heart had cleared. He moved his arm, and I thought he was going to wipe his face with his sleeve, but instead he raised his fist to the sky. Then he said something that I couldn’t wrap my head around.

“All right, well, I guess that’s that! I’ve decided to throw in the towel—at least for this lifetime!”

“Huh?” I squinted, trying to make heads or tails of it, but Ginme just rubbed his nose with a cheeky grin.

“Well, I’m a spirit, after all, I live a lot longer, so I don’t have to rush my life like you humans do. I can afford to wait for the next time, so you can have Kaori in this lifetime. But she’s mine in the next one, you hear?!”

I raised an eyebrow. “You say the weirdest things, you know. And Kaori’s not a thing that you can just have.”

“I know that! I’m not going to force her into anything she doesn’t want,” he said. “I’m going to keep working on myself so I’ll become the best man I can. And then, by the time she reincarnates, I’ll be someone she can fall madly in love with. And training starts up again tomorrow, heh heh heh! Watch out, world!” he shouted.

*Spoken like a true spirit,* I thought. *In fact, it’s really something that only a spirit could say.* However, as a human, I couldn’t even begin to imagine having to wait for the one you love to be reincarnated before you could even have a chance with them. It seemed like such a painful thing to have to put yourself through.

“Are you sure about that?” I asked Ginme. He grinned and nodded.

“I’m sure,” he said. “I know my time will come someday. I’m willing to wait however long it takes.”

*Wow...* I thought. *He really loves Kaori a lot.*

I allowed myself a dry chuckle. I was impressed with how hard Kaori had managed to make this Tengu fall for her, but I could also feel some complicated emotions brewing within me. Ginme had made his mind up on his own, though, so there was nothing I could do. All I *could* do was make sure that I fulfilled all my promises and carried out my responsibilities.

“All right, if you say so,” I said. “Come help me convince Dansaburo-danuki to join us, then.”

“Huh?” Ginme stared at me blankly, his mouth agape.

“I think I already have all the information I need,” I told him. “All we have to



do now is pin down what his big secret is, but I don't think we'll be very successful unless we think a little outside the box. And if we don't succeed, this will all have been for nothing. Since I've got you Tengu twins, I figured, why not try something a little...*different?*"

I let my train of thought spill out in one breath. Ginme softened and tried unsuccessfully to hold back his laughter.

"Ah ha ha ha ha! Oh, you're so funny," he gasped for air.

"Wh-what?!" I stammered. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, you know," he said. "You're kinda cute when you start acting like a little bossy-boots."

"What? Stop being gross," I scrunched my face.

"But I mean—" Ginme wheezed. "Who asks their rival in love for *help* right after beating them? Who does that?!"

"What? What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"Everything, man!" Ginme laughed. "Usually, people would be worried about whether they can stay friends or not! I know I said I was okay with waiting for the next lifetime, but like, I'm still kinda hurt, y'know! I'm actually dying on the inside!"

I put a hand on my chin, taking a moment to digest what Ginme was saying, then tilted my head.

"So, wait. You don't want to be my friend anymore? That's not very nice of you."

"What?!" he shouted.

"You wound me, Ginme. After all the times you spent pestering me to be your friend too..."

He was always being so loud and running me ragged with the way he shot off his idiotic mouth, and at first I would've given anything to make him shut up. All my energy had gone toward just trying to exist, and I didn't have any left to deal with him. However, I probably had him and Kinme to thank for helping me grow. Now I could appreciate the world around me and even enjoy it... No, not

just probably; I definitely owed it to them.

“So... We’re still friends, right? Stay with me a little longer,” I said. It felt so embarrassing to ask him out loud, and I tried to look away, but Ginme was already huddled into a ball and muttering to himself.

“What’s wrong? You got a stomachache?” I asked.

“Sh-sh-shut up! Leave me alone!” he cried.

His ears had turned a deep red for some reason. Was he okay...?

“You’re always so good at saying things that turn Ginme into a mess, just like Kaori,” Kinme chimed in. “Anyway! Putting the issue of to-be-or-not-to-be-friends aside, let’s hear your plan for Dansaburo-danuki. Ignoring the battle for love, we still need to make sure we pull this off successfully for Kaori.”

He then put his lips to my ear and whispered in a low voice, “You took my brother’s love from him, so I expect you to do your job well to make up for it. All right, Suimei?”

His voice was cold as the unforgiving winters, and it sent chills all over my body.

“You are one scary older brother,” I said, trying to grin. I reached into my bag and took out the book that included *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things* and *Kidan: Weird Tales from Japan* by Kobayashi Yakumo, which Kaori had lent me.

“I got this book from Kaori. Very interesting read. In it, there’s a tale called *Story of a Tengu*, and I thought it was the perfect springboard for our task at hand.”

Immediately, the twins perked up, their eyes sparkling with curiosity.

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Unlike the day before, clouds now dominated the skies. The winds whipped through the trees, working the branches and leaves into a frenzy. Kinme, Ginme, and I were back at the shrine with the stone towers to speak with Dansaburo-danuki once again.

“We’re thinking of leaving Sado Island soon,” I told him.

Dansaburo-danuki put his small hands together and bowed. “I see. I beg your forgiveness for my inability to aid you in your quest, despite your long journey here to Sado. Allow me to offer you my sincerest apologies. I shall soon pen a letter to Shibaemon expressing the same sentiment.”

“No, no, we should be the ones apologizing for disrupting your prayer time,” I bowed back. “Right, Ginme?”

I glanced at the Tengu, and he grinned, signaling that he could take over.

“Yeah, that’s true. I’d be pretty annoyed if someone came and disrupted my training too. Ain’t that right, Kinme?”

“Too right,” Kinme nodded. “So, we thought we should do a little something to make it up to you.”

“What do you mean?” Dansaburo-danuki asked, puzzled.

Kinme gave him a big nod in return. “Well, is there anything that you’d wish for? We’re Tengu, so we can use a bit of divine power. It’s not as strong as the mermaid meat that everyone in the spirit world’s spreading rumors about, but it’s still pretty good.”

“A wish...” Dansaburo-danuki considered.

I immediately moved to keep the conversation on track. We had to keep it going according to our plan.

“Dansaburo-sama, we heard from Sabuto that you’re afraid of being punished after death. Is that correct?”

He darted his eyes away. “Well, that’s...”

Even if it may have seemed like his imagination was going wild, this fear was deeply ingrained in his beliefs.

“Why not have the twins let you hear some of Buddha’s sermons, then? From the man himself, at that,” I suggested. “Did you know that when he was alive, he used to preach at the sacred Vulture Peak in India?”

“Yes, of course,” Dansaburo-danuki said. “I recall a monk of my acquaintance who often spoke of it. He frequently expressed the desire to defy space and time in order to witness it himself.”

“Well, that makes things easier,” I said. “These twins here have the ability to do just that.”

“What?!” the tanuki exclaimed, his eyes growing large. He cracked a smile not unlike the Kannon Bodhisattva.

“You’re still honing your ascetic practices, right? So, a sermon by the Gautama Buddha himself would definitely be pretty valuable. I’m not too familiar with Buddhism myself, but maybe you could find a way to atone for your sins and earn a place in the Sukhavati,” I said.

Dansaburo-danuki stood up without even a moment’s delay.

“Right... You may be right! Then please, I implore you to take me!” he pleaded. The Tengu replied quietly to the desperate tanuki:

“Your wish is our command. We’ll bring you to join the Gautama Buddha’s sermon. However, our skills are still quite green,” said Ginme.

“Put the two of us together and you only *might* just get enough experience! So, we need you to promise us one thing,” said Kinme.

“Do not, under any circumstances, make any noise,” the twins cautioned. “Not a single peep. If you break that promise, it will only spell disaster. We’re not responsible for anything that happens, so proceed at your own risk!”

Dansaburo-danuki seemed lost as he contemplated this stark warning. Then, he nodded in agreement.

A sly grin spread across the Tengu’s faces, and they put their hands together, declaring in unison, “O Dansaburo-danuki of Futatsuiwa! Bear witness to the divine strength of us Tengu!”

As if on command, a fierce wind began to whirl through our surroundings...

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When the wind finally stopped, a clear and calming voice came drifting in from the distance. Dansaburo-danuki, who had his eyes squeezed tightly shut, finally began to relax and opened them. However, he was met at once with an overwhelming sight and squinted them until they were half-closed again.

Gone was the familiar Futatsuiwa Shrine. Instead, his vision was filled with

trees made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, coral, agate, and gems—representations of the seven treasures of Buddhism. Datura flowers and red spider lilies were falling endlessly from a sky that glimmered with countless stars, covering every inch of the ground.

The view was truly and utterly otherworldly. Dansaburo-danuki stared, struck with awe, until he noticed a group of people farther away, listening to someone preaching. That was where the clear and calming voice was coming from.

*That must be the Gautama Buddha, he thought. If I can listen to his teachings...*

He took a step forward, eager to join the audience, but stopped when he heard a crunching sound under his feet, too peculiar and out of place for the beautiful scenery he had witnessed. He looked down and saw that the ground was blanketed in small stones, and once he looked up again, he found a roaring river bisecting the landscape, separating him from the Gautama Buddha and his listeners. Here, on Dansaburo-danuki's side, the world was stony and drab, with not a single tree or blade of grass growing. The dreariness of it all sent a shiver rippling through him.

*Those damn Tengu. What are they up to? Anyway, I have to cross that river. I simply must listen to that sermon!*

But, as he lifted his foot, his focus was drawn away by the sound of someone crying—someone whom he recognized. He gasped, looking around in panic, and not far away he spotted a tanuki whose shoulders were balled up. It was a female tanuki. Her body was huddled into a small lump, and she had a hand towel stretched across her head as she wept.

Dansaburo-danuki swallowed. He knew that silhouette very well because it was none other than...

*Sabuto!*

He could probably count on one paw the number of times he had seen Sabuto in the past few years, but that was understandable. After all, he had spent all that time trying to avoid her on purpose. A tight ache began to seize his heart, but he resolved to ignore her for the sake of his mission. However, as Sabuto's sobs continued to rattle her tiny body, his sadness for her grew, and he

faltered. He couldn't bear to see her crying so sorrowfully in the middle of such a bleak landscape, and so he crept toward her.

But as he did, he choked back a scream and tried to rein in his distress. Sabuto had suddenly collapsed and was now curled up on the ground. Dansaburo-danuki dashed to see if she was all right, but what he saw only pushed him closer to shrieking out loud.

The towel had fallen from the impact, and what it uncovered...was not Sabuto at all.

It was the other female tanuki whom he loved dearly.

"O-Oroku..."

Beneath her body, a red, red pool of blood began to form. A fresh gash crossed her neck, and tears dribbled from eyes that were struggling to remain open. Her breath was ragged and her tongue unable to form itself into coherent words.

"Wh-why did this happen?! What's going on?!" Dansaburo-danuki shouted. His promise to the Tengu had completely vanished from his mind as he frantically stripped off whatever he could in order to bind the wound. But even so, the blood continued to gush, and whatever warmth Oroku had left in her body was disappearing rapidly.

Then came footsteps crunching on the gravel, and a voice.

"Dansaburo-sama."

Dansaburo-danuki turned around slowly, fighting the despair that clutched him with every fiber of his being, and his widened eyes could hardly believe what they were seeing.

It was Sabuto, but her mouth was doused in blood mixed with the tears that were streaming down her face.

"You *betrayed* me," she rasped.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!" Dansaburo-danuki screamed, unable to hold himself back any longer. The moment his shriek pierced the air, Sabuto and Oroku vanished like smoke in the wind. The gleaming trees of the seven

treasures began to shatter, one by one, and the flowers that lay on the ground wilted and browned faster than Dansaburo-danuki could blink. A fog swooped in, shrouding the Gautama Buddha across the river until he was no longer visible. The sounds of the sermon were gone, replaced by the wretched wails of the dead. The world had shed its divine beauty, and now horned demons dominated a landscape drenched in blood and flames, its air reverberating with the ceaseless howls of the damned.

“No... Stop!” Dansaburo-danuki cried in fear, crumpling into a quivering heap. All the hairs on his body stood in shock, and he trembled uncontrollably, unable to understand why any of this was happening.

“Aw, look what you did,” said a laid-back voice.

“Jeez, and after we stressed so much that you weren’t allowed to make even a bit of noise too,” another followed.

Dansaburo-danuki raised his head slowly and saw the Tengu twins standing before him. They were looking down at him with unpleasant smirks across their faces while he quivered.

“We told you, our skill is still not the best. So, when you break a taboo, the consequences are going to be especially dire,” Kinme said. “When that happens, the person who breaks it invites upon themselves their own personal Hell. Isn’t that right, Ginme?”

“You got it, Kinme,” Ginme nodded. “That reminds me, isn’t this Shugo Jigoku, the Crushing Hell? This is where people who commit sins of *lewdness* are sent.” He turned to Dansaburo-danuki. “Hey, I thought you said you were training to lead a pious life!”

The twins grinned at each other, like they were having fun.

“Hey, Ginme, did you know that the Shugo Jigoku has different areas for different kinds of sins?” Kinme asked.

“I did, Kinme,” his brother replied. “But can you tell me where exactly Dansaburo-danuki was sent?”

“Of course,” the other Tengu nodded. “That would be the Daihachizumasho. He was there because he tried to pass himself off as a monk even though he’s

not one at all! He offered sutras to Oroku at her place, you know!”

Dansaburo-danuki’s face turned pale, like all the color had been sapped out of it.

Ginme kept talking, regardless. “You might be right about that, Kinme, but I have a different theory. I think he fell to the Muhiganjukusho, because...”

His eerie smirk grew even wider, and he drew his face close to Dansaburo-danuki’s.

“...he was fooling around with some other tanuki even though he had his wife, Sabuto!”

Dansaburo-danuki’s breath caught in his throat as he gasped.

“I gotta say, cheating’s a real no-no for me, my guy,” Ginme shrugged. The words stabbed into Dansaburo-danuki like an arrow, and he gulped. Tremors were still shaking his body, and his thoughts had tangled themselves into a knotted mess inside his head. He was even beginning to lose his sense of right and wrong on all but one subject, which he had already made his mind up about long ago.

“I swear, that’s my biggest regret ever!” he cried. Gone were all traces of his affected vocabulary as he stopped pretending to be the monk that he wasn’t. “I know it was my fault. I’m ready to make up for it however I can. I’ll apologize to Sabuto with all my heart. A-and I admit that I love Oroku! I can’t deny it, but a sin is a sin! I’m willing to accept that, no matter what Hell I get cast into after death!”

Ginme glared at the tanuki from above, and when he spoke again, his voice was sharp with a frosty edge to it. “That’s a surprise, after you spent all that time on your training because you were so frightened of Hell.”

“No, no!” Dansaburo-danuki insisted. “I’m not scared, I swear! So please...” he begged, his face smeared with tears. Pride was the last thing on his mind as he desperately clung to the Tengu.

“Please, give me another chance to hear the Gautama Buddha’s sermon! I need that more than anything else!”



“I knew it. What you fear is not your own sin...” a cold voice echoed. The tanuki looked up and saw that it was Suimei.

“For a long time now, you’ve been seeing Oroku behind Sabuto’s back,” the boy continued.

“Th-that’s right,” Dansaburo-danuki said.

“Your greatest fear was realized five years ago on the day with record rainfalls. Oroku’s home is right by the bridge, so of course it would be washed away if there was a big storm. Tanuki dens are not the strongest of structures either, so it would only take a second for one to collapse in the mud and rain,” Suimei said.

“So you’re saying that Oroku was swept away too? But she’s still alive and well,” one of the Tengu interjected.

“That’s correct. And that was Dansaburo-danuki’s only ray of salvation,” he nodded, letting his mouth fall shut. Dansaburo-danuki could only watch as the hell-flames danced in the exorcist’s eyes. His skin crawled as the steely gaze bore through him like it was peeling back everything he was trying to hide inside his heart. Unable to stand it any longer, he tore his eyes away.

*Krrsh. Gshrr. Krrsh.*

Out of nowhere, he began to hear what sounded like rocks rubbing against each other.

*What is that sound? What’s going on?* the tanuki thought.

*Krrsh. Gshrr. Krrsh. Ka-lack. Ka-lack ka-lack ka-lack!* A loud rattling shook the air, as if a giant stack of rocks had been toppled over. Dansaburo-danuki gasped and looked to Suimei for an explanation, but the boy stared straight past him, eyes locked on something behind him.

Kinme’s words began to play in his mind, clear as if the Tengu himself had spoken to them again: *“Our skill is still not the best. So, when you break a taboo, the consequences are going to be especially dire. When that happens, the person who breaks it invites upon themselves their own personal Hell.”*

“Wait, their *personal* Hell?”

*No. No... No, no, no, no! Don't tell me that what's behind me is—*

“AAAUUUHHHHHH!” Dansaburo-danuki screamed and fell to his knees.

*Don't look back! Don't look back, don't look back...!*

“Stop it! Make it stop, please! I'm scared! What do you want from me?!” he bawled, tears streaking down his face. He felt as if a terrifying light were being shone on the deepest and darkest parts of himself that he tried so desperately to hide. How, he wondered with alarm, could Suimei stare so blankly at what had to be behind him? He could stand the light no more, and the secret he had locked away rose forth, unstoppable, until it spilled out of his mouth.

“I admit it! Everything I did was to try and wash away *their* sins...the sins of my children who were swallowed by the flood five years ago!” he shouted, trembling.

“Those stones you have stacked up in front of the Futatsuiwa Shrine are from the Sai-no-Kawara, aren't they?” Suimei asked quietly.

Dansaburo-danuki nodded without speaking.

“The river of the Sai-no-Kawara is where children who have met untimely deaths go,” Suimei continued. “There, they are punished for the sin of dying earlier than their parents and causing them sorrow, and are sentenced to the laborious task of stacking stones. However, before they can complete their stack, an oni will knock it down, forcing them to start again. How cruel.”

Suimei crouched so he was level with the tanuki.

“Five years ago, the children you had with Oroku perished in the flood and were sent to the Sai-no-Kawara. Ever since, you have been trying to find a way to atone for their sins,” he said.

“...Yes. That's right,” Dansaburo-danuki hung his head, defeated, with large teardrops falling from his eyes.

“They were still newborns, the tiny little things. They couldn't even suckle properly yet, and they made the most adorable mewls,” he whispered. “I wanted to help keep them warm because they looked so cold with the rain and all, so I left the den to find some straw. I tried to hurry back as soon as possible,

but I returned to find that the entire nest had been washed away.”

As Dansaburo-danuki recounted the most terrible day of his life, the despair and grief that had overtaken him came back fresh as ever. He curled up, holding his head in his hands.

“They didn’t do anything wrong! It was all my fault. If I had just come back a few minutes earlier, they wouldn’t have died!” he sobbed.

*Kalack. Ka-lack ka-lack.*

The sound of the tumbling rocks had returned.

*Oh... This must mean my children are blaming themselves for the sin they were burdened with,* Dansaburo-danuki thought.

He could not proudly declare his illegitimate children to the world, and on top of that, he believed that his negligence had caused their death. No wonder he had so much self-hate and resentment brewing within him.

“It was all my fault, so why? Why do my children have to bear that sin?!” he wailed. “Oh, my babes, my precious babes, there’s no reason why you should suffer. Please, wait for me! I promise I will release you from your labor and free you from the banks of the Sai-no-Kawara as soon as I can! That’s... That’s...!”

He took a deep breath and shouted at the top of his lungs, “That’s what I have to do as your *fatheeerrr!!!*”

A hush fell over their surroundings as the lamentations of the dead ceased. Only the sound of the tumbling rocks could be heard. *Ka-lack. Ka-lack.*

“Ha. If only all fathers were as kind as you,” Suimei chuckled bitterly, although Dansaburo-danuki had no idea what he was talking about. The tanuki looked up, puzzled, and Ginme began to speak.

“Well, now that we know your story, I gotta say that you’ve been through a lot, man. Sins don’t just go away so easily. I mean, look at all the hells we’ve got for sinners,” he said lightly, but then his expression darkened.

“Although, I think that your biggest sin has got to be your *ignorance*.”

Dansaburo-danuki gasped, lost for words. Ginme grinned mischievously, baring his canines.

“Say, is it just me, or do you hear that sound too?”

*Klak. Ka-lack.*

Of course he heard it. Just being reminded of it made him shrink, but the Tengu lifted him and said, “Take a good look at what it is.”

“What...?” Dansaburo-danuki couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The Sai-no-Kawara was...nowhere to be found. Instead, there was only Kinme, throwing about the rocks that lay scattered on the ground.

“Hiya!” the twin called.

The tanuki’s mouth opened and closed like a fish. He was stunned. “Wha... What? How?”

Ginme laughed, almost apologetically. “Did you know that the Sai-no-Kawara doesn’t actually appear in any Buddhist teachings? It’s folklore at best.”

“What do you mean?”

“Apparently it *is* based on something from the Lotus Sutra, though,” Ginme said. “But other than that, it’s got nothing to do with *actual* Buddhism. No one knows who came up with it in the first place, and we probably won’t ever find out. So...”

Ginme placed a comforting hand on Dansaburo-danuki’s head and smiled. “I think it’s safe to say that your kids aren’t stacking rocks by the banks or anything.”

The tanuki’s jaw trembled. Then his mouth hung open, and tears welled up in his eyes.

“Dansaburo-sama? If I may, I have one suggestion,” Suimei said.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Why not leave Sado Island and see what else is out there in the world?” the exorcist suggested. “After all, this whole situation happened because your narrow worldview misled you into some mistaken beliefs.”

Dansaburo-danuki winced in shame, struck by the weight of letting something untrue terrorize him for five years.

“Ha ha... I don’t think ‘embarrassed’ could begin to sum up how I feel,” he said, closing his eyes.

However, Suimei shook his head gently. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I won’t deny that ignorance is a sin, but perhaps it’s the only sin that you can wash away with your own efforts. All you have to do is fill in the gaps in your knowledge.”

“Hey, why don’t you try becoming a monk for real?” Kinme asked, poking his head out from behind Suimei’s back. “Even if the Sai-no-Kawara doesn’t actually exist, wouldn’t you like to give your children a proper memorial service, anyway? I think you should. No offense, but your sutras couldn’t put *anyone* to rest, let alone your kids. If you’d like, I could get my master to introduce you to a human monk. I’m sure there’s some oddball out there who wouldn’t mind taking a raccoon dog as an apprentice.”

“Are... Are you sure?” Dansaburo-danuki’s eyes sparkled, and plump teardrops started to fall. “I would be so thankful. Really, thank you so much. How...How could I ever repay you?”

Suimei and the twins exchanged glances.

“Well, could you do something for us?” Suimei asked, feeling a little awkward about the request. “We’d like you to help us change Hakuzosu’s mind. Just like how you wanted to protect your children, I have someone precious to me who I want to protect. And to do that, I need your help. I know you swore off tricking people, but...please, help us.”

He turned to Dansaburo-danuki and bowed deeply. The tanuki stared at the boy...and nodded.

“All right, you have my word. I will help you with whatever you need,” he said. And the moment those words left his lips, it was like a fog had been lifted from him, and his expression became as bright and sunny as a summer’s day.

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“I should send Kaori a note about what happened...” I muttered to myself.

We had left the world the Tengu twins had created, and now I finally had a moment to myself. As I stared into the sky, I thought about the story in Koizumi

Yakumo's book, *Story of a Tengu*. It was retold from a collection of cautionary tales from the Kamakura period called *Jikkinsho*. In this story, a Tengu grants a fairly high-ranking monk one wish for saving his life, and the monk wishes to see a certain landscape. The Tengu agrees but warns the monk that he must not make a sound. However, when the monk sees his dream landscape, he is so overwhelmed that he begins to pray, despite the Tengu's warnings. Then, the landscape vanishes.

It popped into my head when I began to unravel Dansaburo-danuki's story, because they were so similar. At first glance, the two might have seemed to be opposites: The monk forgot about the warning because he was so overjoyed to see the landscape that did not exist in real life, whereas Dansaburo-danuki feared the nonexistent Sai-no-Kawara and the punishment that he thought had been forced upon his children. However, I think it would be fair to say that both of them were trapped because of their narrow worldviews and rendered unable to make good decisions.

*"May we stay pure of mind, free of defilements. Nanmandabu... Lotus join hands now, for a sutra for the heart and stomach... Raaaaamen!"*

As nonsensical as that "sutra" was, it only made me feel sorrier for him now that I understood what he had gone through. He was like the old me, in a sense. The me who had to repress his emotions, abandoned by his partner Kuro, tossed about in the dark chaos of rampant spirits...

"Suimeeee!" one of the twins shouted. "We're going to Tochigi Prefecture next! I think Nasu Yumoto is near there too. It's a really famous hot-spring town!"

"Ooh, more onsens! Nice!" The other twin was clearly interested as well. "A day trip to soak in a hot bath is just what a broken heart needs!"

Kuro agreed. "Whooo! We get to go to an onsen again? I want an onsen-manju!" the Inugami yapped.

I smiled. The old me would have never thought that spirits could be so lively.

"You've already had your fill of hot springs. We can't spend any more time soaking in Tochigi!" I said.

“Whaaaaaat?!” the three spirits groaned, pouting. I chuckled and looked up at the sky. The sun was slowly setting, gradually turning the world darker and darker.

*I wonder what Kaori's doing now,* I thought. I couldn't wait to tell her that we had convinced Dansaburo-danuki to join us. She'd be really glad to hear that. She might even start jumping for joy.

*That's the one bad thing about letters,* I sighed. *You can't see how the other person reacts.*

I suddenly felt a burning desire to see Kaori. Even though I didn't know when I'd be able to meet her again, I couldn't wait.

I smiled to myself and went to join the three boisterous spirits.

## Side Story:

### The Kind, the Firm of Hand, the Beloved

**I**F SOMEONE HAD OFFERED you words of kindness when your spirit had been crushed, or you'd been backed into a corner, or your future seemed bleak and impossible, how much do you think you'd be able to take?

In the long lives we lead, we've all gotten lost at one point or another, and when we've lost our way, we've all wished for someone to guide us back to the right path. If you are lucky enough to meet someone who will point you in the right direction with kindness and even a bit of tough love at times, you've undoubtedly scored one of life's greatest blessings.

At the very least, you'd no longer have to journey alone, grappling about in the dark.

Noname of the apothecary was just such a beacon of light to Kaori and other lost spirits. Many denizens of the spirit world looked up to her because of the comforting and reassuring words she offered. She became the kind of person to give such encouragement because, once upon a time, she was shown the same charity. If it weren't for that, she would not be the Noname she is today. This is the story of a man who, unable to shoulder the enormous duty given to him, ran away and ended up opening an apothecary in the spirit world, an ordinary woman who supported him with kindness and a firm hand when needed, and an artist who staked his entire life on his craft.

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In the dusky town of Edo, the clock struck six.

Before a large shop facing the street, the employees bustled about as they prepared to close up for the evening. The smoke rising from the homes dotted around town carried with it the delicious aroma of home-cooked meals, tickling the appetites of anyone who caught the scent.

It was almost the height of summer. The sun now took longer to set, and even after it had dipped well below the horizon, the sky would still be lit with the



vibrant palette of twilight which soaked the world in colors that almost seemed to be daring the darkness to obscure their brilliance. However, the night would catch up soon enough; it would only take about an hour for the town to be plunged into a cloying darkness that not even the oil lamps could defeat.

But the townspeople had long grown accustomed to this, and they knew to prepare for bed swiftly so they could sleep early to prepare for the next day—and, of course, save on oil as well. Another reason was to avoid the spirits that wandered the night. Rather than having a frightening encounter with the supernatural, wouldn't it be wiser to let yourself sleep and experience an enjoyable dream?

So, as the townspeople drifted into their dream-filled wonderlands one by one, silence fell over Edo, and dusk gave way to a starry sky. The Hour of the Ox crept closer as time marched toward two o'clock. One lone man sat on his engawa veranda, looking up at the stars without a single hint of sleepiness as the night breeze blew.

The man was elderly, with a slightly crooked nose and sanpaku eyes that would make other people pin him as stubborn or hardheaded. He had a gangly and frail frame that indicated he was not at all a fighter. The hairs on his head and chin were white and thin, and he had only barely managed to fashion what was left into a beard. Although the late nights were quite chilly even in summer, the man wore only a juban, unbothered by the cold.

"The moon is especially beautiful tonight, isn't it?" a woman spoke from behind him as she covered him with a blanket. She looked a few years younger than the man. Her gentle heart showed on her face.

"Are you waiting for more spirits to come again?" she asked, chuckling as she took the kiseru pipe from the man's hand. Its bowl had long since gone cold, and it glinted in the light of the lamp the woman had brought.

"Of course," he answered. "I'm positive that someone will come on a night like this." He looked at the perfectly round moon that was glowing in the sky. "Is it not the Hour of the Ox yet? Oyuki, have you prepared my inks?"

"Everything is ready," she replied with a giggle. "Toyofusa-sama, you are just like a child."

“I can’t help myself,” he shrugged. “I am just having so much fun.”

His giddy excitement was completely unlike the usual behavior of someone his age, and he was looking around here and there in great anticipation. However, he didn’t seem to see what he was hoping to find, and his shoulders drooped. Oyuki, the old woman, laughed.

“Oh, you can be so funny sometimes,” she said as she hid her mouth with the sleeve of her kimono and gazed fondly at Toyofusa with warm eyes. The flame of her lamp seemed to light up her chestnut eyes with a charming spark, and for a moment, Toyofusa found his breath taken away, unable to take his eyes off of her. However, the awkwardness of being captivated by his wife of so many years filled him with self-consciousness a few seconds later, and he darted his eyes away.

“Enough of the teasing,” he grumbled.

“Oh, I didn’t mean that,” she said. “You just seem so happy that your *Gazu Hyakki Yako* book was so well received.”

“Shouldn’t I be?” Toyofusa asked.

“No, not at all,” Oyuki said. “I am just as happy for you as if it were my own work.”

Hearing these words, Toyofusa’s face immediately lit up, and he bashfully rubbed his neck.

This man was Sano Toyofusa—also known as Toriyama Sekien. His master was the renowned Kano Chikanobu of the Kano school of art, and Toyofusa had many apprentices of his own. His work as an illustrator was recognized by the shogunate, and he had recently unveiled his new volume, *Gazu Hyakki Yako*. This collection of spirit illustrations immediately became the talk of the town and was praised for its vivid depictions, as if he had been looking at genuine spirits while drawing them.

“Who would have thought that I actually did use real spirits as references for my art?” Toyofusa chuckled.

“No one would expect that, I’m sure,” Oyuki said.

“Don’t tell anyone, all right?” the man said.

“Of course,” the woman nodded. “No one would believe it, anyway.”

That’s right: *Gazu Hyakki Yako* wasn’t drawn based on hearsay and fantasies but real spirits that Toyofusa had seen himself.

It all began when the supreme commander of all spirits—Nurarihyon—started to occasionally appear at Toyofusa’s house. Although the two were not of the same realm, they formed an unlikely friendship and got along splendidly. One day, while drunk, Toyofusa had begged Nurarihyon to sit for a portrait, and Nurarihyon agreed. Over time, the artist would painstakingly render the visiting spirits on page after page, and those illustrations were turned into *Gazu Hyakki Yako*.

Interestingly, the spirit that took the most time and effort to capture was Nurarihyon. Even though he was the first to be drawn, Toyofusa was never satisfied with his depiction, and he started from scratch numerous times. Thus, the spirit had to wait until the last of the collection’s three sub-volumes to be shown.

“I’m very glad I was able to create a masterpiece this year that will leave my name in the annals of history,” Toyofusa said. “I could never thank Nurarihyon enough for that. Hey, Oyuki, I’m going to make more pictures and create more books than just *Gazu Hyakki Yako*! I’m going to keep drawing more and more spirits!” As he spoke about his plans, his eyes glittered, and new life seemed to spring into his expression. Oyuki smiled, her face radiating with softness.

“And I will always be here to support you,” she said.

Toyofusa found himself unable to resist that warm smile. He felt his face flush, the cold tips of his ears growing hot and prickly. He didn’t know what to do but to fidget and scratch at them, and so he did just that.

Toyofusa’s interest in art was first ignited when he saw a brilliantly illustrated folding screen as a child. He had been born into a family of servants who worked in the Edo Castle, and he happened upon the folding screen by chance. He was immediately taken by the meticulous brushwork, the bold composition, the lively rendering that seemed to give the people in the artwork their own pulse, and the extravagant gold foil that decorated the entire piece. He just had

to know who created it, and so he asked his father.

“A famous artist called Kano Eitoku drew it,” his father told him. “It’s a great treasure of the most powerful man in our country. Take this chance to enshrine that artwork in your memory, son. Let yourself absorb the work of someone who was skilled enough to leave his name in the annals of history.”

“His name...?” the young Toyofusa mulled. He was drawn to the idea that someone who had died so long ago still had his name spoken among the living.

Toyofusa’s family was not a clan of samurai, but even if they were, there had been no need for war since the Tokugawas anyway. Toyofusa had no chance of leaving his name anywhere...unless, of course, he was able to produce a masterpiece. A masterpiece so great that it could sink its claws into history and leave huge marks across it, and so brilliant that not even time could dull its shine. If he were an artist, proof of his existence could remain even after his body had long since perished.

“Father, I would like to become an artist whose mark will be known well into the future!” he declared.

And so, Toyofusa embarked on his artistic journey. He became an apprentice of the Kano school through his father’s connections, and eventually he even became an artist for the shogunate. However, the one thing he could not do was produce something that satisfied him.

It was not as if his work was bad. In fact, his art was highly respected, and he was even able to take on a good number of apprentices himself. He had everything he needed to lead a comfortable life, and to any outsider he appeared to be the image of success. But it was not enough for him. He wasn’t after moderate achievements, so he wouldn’t be satisfied until he was sure that his legacy as Toriyama Sekien would be celebrated even after his passing.

However, no matter how much he worked, he failed to create anything that he could contentedly call a masterpiece. Toyofusa began to question his abilities, wondering if he had plateaued at the peak of mediocrity, and this wore away at his mind every day.

“I shall die, then,” he decided when he could take the anguish no longer. “I shall die and thus be reborn. It is all I can do now.” He felt that there was no

solution to his inadequate skill but to end this lifetime and pray for the next. He was only convinced otherwise by his faithful wife, Oyuki.

“It is still too early to give up,” she said firmly. “Have a little more patience. The road of an artist is not so easily traveled. You must know that better than anybody else!”

Oyuki wrapped her arms around her husband and his weary heart. “I believe that your talents still have more to give, Toyofusa-sama. I am sure you will achieve your dream as long as you don’t give up, and I know this to be true because I’ve watched over you all these years. So please, be patient and let this life run its natural course, and then we can think about the next life after that. I would like some time to prepare myself too.”

Toyofusa was confused. “For what?”

“For when I must pull you out of your darkness again in the next life, of course!” she answered. “That is my duty as your wife!”

Oyuki never failed to encourage and comfort Toyofusa with her honest words, and with her by his side, he was finally able to publish *Gazu Hyakki Yako* in the later years of his life.

“I could not have done this without you, Oyuki. You have my eternal gratitude,” Toyofusa said bashfully.

“Oh, you make it sound like everything is over now,” Oyuki laughed merrily. “But no one would be worse off if you were to leave more masterpieces for the future, would they? Please, continue to create more and more of your artworks!”

Her eyes creased in a happy smile, and Toyofusa felt his tears rising.

“Of course,” he said. “You’re stern as always... But while you have a firm hand, you are kinder than anyone else I know.”

He brought his hand, now wrinkled and stiff with age, to Oyuki’s fingers.

“I promise that I will never put my brush down,” he said, looking deep into his wife’s eyes. “And I hope that you will be here for every new creation.”

Oyuki blushed a light, rosy pink.

“Will you stay with me even in our next lives? I’d like to leave my mark, even then,” Toyofusa asked.

“Oh my!” Oyuki gasped, batting her eyes as a wide smile spread across her face. “Of course, I would love to!” Her chestnut eyes began to well with warm tears, and as Toyofusa saw them glistening in the dim light, he felt himself fall for her all over again.

“I can truly say that I am very blessed,” Oyuki said.

“I’m just glad that I can make you feel that way,” Toyofusa said.

The two were at the age where they could pass away any day now. Toyofusa felt that there was no greater gift than being able to spend the rest of his days with Oyuki and promising to devote their next lives to each other.

“Pardon me. I’m sorry to disturb your happy little moment,” a voice called from beyond the tree in the garden.

The couple gasped and broke apart, straightening their clothes.

“No, no, no, not at all! My apologies. And who might you be?” Toyofusa coughed, clearing his throat in the hope of also clearing the awkwardness in the air.

He raised the lamp hurriedly. In the yellow glow of the flame, he saw that their visitor sported a head of long, deep green hair that was bright—even in the dark. His eyes only widened more as he realized the visitor also had a pair of curled bovine horns growing from his head. His beautiful face, which was sure to turn heads, featured a set of gleaming yellow eyes. Two were where they would usually be on a human’s face, and another was on his forehead. All three of them were bordered by long lashes and staring at Toyofusa in the gloom of the night. The artist’s heart skipped a beat as he realized that a spirit had finally come, but then he observed that his guest had deep circles under his eyes.

Upon closer inspection, the spirit’s skin was sallow and his cheeks hollow. He had sunk to his knees like a puppet with its strings cut. He seemed to have pushed himself to his physical limits.

“I heard there was an artist here who did wonderful portraits, but... Goodness, I’m sorry, but could you let me rest for a while first?” the young man

asked.

“O-oh, of course! Oyuki?”

“I will prepare some bedding right away, Toyofusa-sama.”

The elderly man watched as his wife retreated swiftly. He looked over at the spirit, bewildered.

“What is your name?” he asked.

Silence.

The spirit made no move to answer. He was different from the others who had visited before. But the spirit seemed to realize that Toyofusa was watching him with a worried look, and he laughed almost bitterly.

“Oh, I’m sorry. You wanted to know my name, yes? Of course, of course. You can’t know who I am without my name, can you?” the being who looked so much like a young man said, his beauty ever so slightly twisted by an unsuppressed sorrow. “My name is Hakutaku. In the past, people have called me a beast of good omen, but I’d rather describe myself as useless.” As he introduced himself, clear drops—teardrops—began to fall from his eyes.

As Toyofusa watched the tears spill, he could only blink in astonishment. He had not expected such an important spirit to come to his doorstep.

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Hakutaku’s heavy eyelids fluttered open, and he was met with the sight of an unfamiliar ceiling.

He recalled that after his meeting with Toriyama Sekien, he had been brought into a room in the house and fallen into a deep sleep. As he sluggishly scanned his surroundings, he saw that Oyuki was sitting right beside him.

“You’ve been out for quite some time,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“You’re...” Hakutaku managed. He glanced over at the paper doors and saw that it was still dark outside. He had arrived at the house before the Hour of the Ox had struck, and although he had no idea just how long he had slept, he knew that it was quite late. And yet the elderly woman appeared to have been tending to him this entire time.

The spirit opened his mouth to thank her, but before he could say a word, he was promptly offered a teacup filled with neither hot water nor green tea, but a brown liquid.

“Oh... Thank you,” Hakutaku said.

He wasn't sure exactly what the liquid was, but he accepted it and took a sip. As he did, an enticing fragrance tickled his nose. He suddenly noticed how dry his throat was, and he drained the cup in one gulp. The liquid was gentle on the tongue with hardly any hint of bitterness, and it quenched his thirst like rain in a desert.

“This is delicious,” he said.

“I'm happy to hear that,” Oyuki smiled. Hakutaku learned that what he had just drunk was hot barley tea and that it was popular among the townsfolk, especially on nights when they found it hard to sleep.

“I thought that perhaps plain hot water would be a bit...drab,” Oyuki said. She further explained that barley tea didn't keep the drinker awake at night, like green tea was wont to do.

“I see,” Hakutaku said with a nod. “You seem to be rather well off and yet you still like to partake in the beverages of the common folk?”

Oyuki's brown eyes widened for a second in surprise, and she chuckled.

“Well, you never know what may become the inspiration for a masterpiece. As Toriyama Sekien's wife, I must arm myself with whatever knowledge I can.”

“Right,” Hakutaku said. It struck him that Oyuki was an exceptional partner; indeed, that was his first impression of her. She was able to provide generous hospitality at a moment's notice to any of her husband's guests, even if it was a strange spirit. And from the way she had spoken about her husband, Hakutaku could tell that she would even be willing to give her life for him.

“I'm sorry for all the trouble I have caused you,” he said, propping himself up. He felt a little warm, perhaps even somewhat feverish, but he didn't have time to pay it any more attention. “Has Sekien already gone to bed? If not, I'd like to have my portrait drawn as soon as...”



“I’m afraid we cannot do that, dear guest,” Oyuki said.

Hakutaku stared, caught off guard by the interruption. He studied Oyuki’s face, trying to gauge if he had misheard her or if she could be jesting, but she only looked back at him with a determined gaze. As the pale moonlight lit the world outside, Oyuki remained still and unmoving in the dark, and Hakutaku realized that she had been completely serious.

“Can I ask why?” he said nervously.

Oyuki shook her head firmly. “You must rest until you recover and your complexion returns to its healthy shade.”

“But...!” Hakutaku protested. “But I must have my portrait drawn as soon as possible! There are evils out there that must be warded off!”

Auspicious beasts like Hakutaku were believed to have great power, and artworks depicting their form—called *jaki-e*—were said to protect people from various demons, evil spirits, and other supernatural beings that were believed to inflict ailments. Thus, there was a culture of hanging these images by one’s door, and Hakutaku had made the trek here to have such a picture created of himself.

“There are hundreds of people out there who need saving. At this moment, someone could be in danger from a plague spirit, and they may die! So—”

“No,” Oyuki said, unwilling to yield her decision. Hakutaku gulped, unable to convince her otherwise. He could tell that the only reason why she had not yet raised her voice in anger was because she was, first and foremost, a host to their sick guest.

“But why? Can you tell me that, at least?” Hakutaku asked, trying to be as patient as he could.

Oyuki half shut her eyes. “It is simple,” she said, as if there were no clearer truth. “Toyofusa-sama has no need for weak spirits in his masterpieces. If you must insist on having your portrait drawn in haste, I would be more than willing to introduce you to another artist.”

She pressed the three center fingers of each hand to the tatami beneath her and bowed abruptly. “I hope you can understand that I have my husband’s best

interests at heart.”

Gone were any traces of the blushing maiden whom Hakutaku had seen in the garden, and something about her stubbornness made him burst into laughter.

“Pfft... Ah ha ha ha ha! I’m so... You’re a strange one, truly!” he howled. This was the first time anyone had treated him like this. He was Hakutaku, an auspicious beast whose name was known not only throughout Japan but in China as well. Normally, when people saw that a creature of good omen such as himself had visited them, they would stop at nothing to provide him with the best hospitality they could and grant him any request he wanted. But now, here this elderly woman was, refusing to budge and telling him to rest, and even threatening to send him away! Hakutaku could not help but clutch at his stomach as he shook with laughter, doubling over as he did so.

Oyuki was shocked at the sudden reaction. “I do apologize if I have offended you...” she said.

“Oh, no, not at all!” Hakutaku waved a casual hand at her, his mood having been completely reversed. “I suppose I should take you up on your suggestion and rest. And you’re right, I can imagine that I look much too ghastly to sit for a portrait right now.”

He raised a finger to his cheek, and just from that one touch he could tell that his skin was worse than it had ever been. “Just positively ghastly...” he murmured as the tears began to surge again.

Seeing the disheartened Hakutaku, Oyuki bowed again. “If there is anything at all I can do for you, please let me know right away.” She then stood to leave the room, her footsteps making not a single sound. Before she exited, she murmured, “Please, do not worry yourself too much. Each one of us has something that only we can do.”

Then, she shut the sliding screen without another word. The pale moonlight was still bright as ever, filling the room with its luminance. Hakutaku had resigned himself to sleep again, but instead of closing his eyes, he lay in the quiet room and blinked to himself as he mulled over the events of the night and the words Oyuki had left him with.

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Hakutaku was bestowed upon the mortal realm by the heavens as a gift of grace, and Toyofusa could hardly believe that this symbol of blessings was actually in his house, even the day after the beast had appeared in his garden.

This spirit first appeared in ancient China during the legendary rule of the mythical Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor. From time immemorial, Chinese legend said that Hakutaku would be sent from above as a lucky, auspicious omen whenever there was a virtuous ruler or when there was peace throughout society. Huangdi led the nation well, and so, Hakutaku appeared during his time.

Hakutaku was depicted as a white bovine beast with a human face, one who was knowledgeable about all sorts of demons and supernatural beings. Drawing from this knowledge, Huangdi created a book called the *Bai Ze Tu*, or the *Hakutaku-zu* in Japanese. This volume would equip humans with the information they needed to avoid supernatural threats.

Although the book was lost sometime during the Song dynasty, the tradition of using pictures of Hakutaku to ward off evil persisted, and this beast was often used as the subject of works by Kano artists in Japan as well. Toyofusa, who had the tendency to become so engrossed in his work that he would neglect to eat or sleep, was ecstatic that his chance to draw this spirit had finally come.

He downed his breakfast quickly and went to the room where Hakutaku was resting, loitering outside its door. He could detect the servants' baffled looks, but there was no time to bother himself with that. All the artist could think about was how he should depict the terrifyingly beautiful beast. Oyuki had told him to let Hakutaku rest, but there wasn't any harm in taking another peek, was there? Or having a bit of conversation while he was at it, surely.

And that head of green hair—what a mystical shade it was. According to the legends he had heard, Hakutaku's whole body was meant to be white, so why was his hair green...?

*Ohhh, I know that I'll be meeting him soon enough, but I really cannot wait!*

Toyofusa crept closer and closer to the guestroom, stepping as lightly as possible, until he could almost touch the sliding door—which suddenly burst

open.

It was Oyuki, who carried a small, wooden pail in one hand.

“Can I help you?” she asked with a sweet smile, and a chill ran down Toyofusa’s back. He had been with her long enough to know what that smile meant: She was in the worst possible mood ever.

“Oh... Um, I just...” the man stammered, frantically backing away and trying not to fall off the engawa. His balance recovered just on the edge of it, and he let out a sigh of relief. However, he could tell that his wife still expected an answer, so he turned toward her, his head moving like a clumsy toddler was twisting it.

“Toyofusa-sama?” Oyuki was still smiling.

“Erm, yes?” he said, quivering.

“I believe I told you this earlier, but our guest is still quite frail. I will be watching over him to ensure that he gets adequate rest, so please leave him to me,” she said.

“I see,” was all Toyofusa could manage.

“Now, please do not interfere with his recuperation. This is all for the sake of your masterpiece.”

Toyofusa sighed. “All right.” He knew he could not win against his wife.

Oyuki giggled at his meekness. “There is nothing to worry about. He will be back in good health soon. It’s all in the mind, you see.”

And with that, she turned on her heel to leave.

Perplexed, Toyofusa pondered over her words. And then, an uneasy thought came to him.

“Oh, Oyuki,” he said.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Hakutaku may be renowned as an auspicious beast, but he is still a man, nonetheless. Try not to find yourself alone with him in that room.”

Oyuki blinked, her brown eyes bulging, and then she smiled in amusement.

“What strange things are you thinking now, Toyofusa-sama? What would a beautiful young man like him want with an old woman like me?” she chuckled pleasantly and left. As the man watched his wife disappear around the corner, he found himself flummoxed by mixed emotions. Rubbing his neck awkwardly, he stared at Hakutaku’s room.

“Well, Oyuki’s right. I’ll get to meet him properly sooner or later,” he decided. Laughing dryly to himself, he left the hallway with quiet footsteps.

A few days later, Edo was visited by another beautiful moon on a quiet night. Although its roundness was missing a slight sliver in its side, the moon shone brightly nevertheless and doused the town in a pale light. As every other family slumbered and went off to their respective dreamlands, the Sano household was livelier than usual. Their garden, neither small nor large, held a welter of clamoring, light brown fuzzballs all yapping and yelping. In the center was a ravishing woman wearing an elegant junihitoe kimono in all its twelve glorious layers. She took one glance at the sketch Toyofusa had done, and her slender eyes creased in delight.

“You are a talented man, Seiken! You draw just as well as the rumors say!” she complimented.

“I’m honored to hear that,” he bowed.

“You have done an excellent job in capturing my beauty,” the woman continued. “Wonderful. Just wonderful. In return, I shall grant you any wish you want.”

Toyofusa shook his head. “Oh, no, I couldn’t. Being blessed with the chance to illustrate an enchanting figure such as yourself is enough for me.”

“There’s no need to be so humble. Or, what if...” She darted a coquettish glance at him over the top of her cypress fan. “...I were to allow you to take me as your mistress?”

“Y-you jest, my lady...” Toyofusa stuttered. The woman giggled, enjoying how flustered the artist had become.

This woman was none other than Tamamo-no-Mae, a famous spirit whom

Nurarihyon had introduced to Toyofusa when he had heard that a sequel to *Gazu Hyakki Yako* was in the works. She possessed tremendous power within herself, so much that even a plain human like Toyofusa could feel it radiating from her. In order to keep her in high spirits, he had to put extra effort into choosing his words carefully. Seeing how serious he was, Tamamo-no-Mae couldn't help but toy with him a little.

"He seems to be having a rough time," Hakutaku commented as he watched the two, clearly enjoying their exchanges as well.

Beside him sat Oyuki, who, on the contrary, was visibly irritated. She was pouting like a schoolgirl and practically boring holes into Toyofusa's back with her intense glare. Tamamo-no-Mae caught sight of her and grinned slyly.

"Oh, I see. You cannot admit to your desires while your wife is present. Then, whenever your fancy is tickled again, send me a poem of your fiercest, burning passions and I shall let you take me to bed," she smirked.

"B-bed?!" Toyofusa's face immediately turned a fierce red. "N-no, no, no. Pardon me, my lady, but I must decline." He frantically refused the woman's advances, but to another pair of eyes, it could seem as if he were secretly happy about the offer.

Oyuki groaned and puffed her cheeks out, round as mochi, and Hakutaku could do nothing to hold his laughter back. As he spat in his pathetic attempt to do so, Oyuki exhaled sharply through her nose.

"What are you laughing at? I see nothing funny here!"

"W-well, I mean..." the spirit couldn't stop shaking. "How do you expect me *not* to laugh?!"

"My goodness, Hakutaku-sama!" Oyuki grumbled.

"I'm done, Oyuki," Toyofusa said. It seems that while the other two were preoccupied, the wicked woman had left. The artist plopped himself onto the floorboards of the engawa, exhausted and still red in the face.

"She loves her jokes a little too much," he muttered. "I appreciate her offer to grant me a wish, but that was no conversation to be having with an old man like me!"

“Exactly!” Oyuki huffed, face turned away from her husband.

“Er, Oyuki? What’s wrong?” Toyofusa asked, worried at the way his wife was acting. He looked to Hakutaku for help, but the spirit only returned a disapproving glance.

“Look at you, being all blushy with a hag like that when you’ve got a wonderful lady like Oyuki-chan. You really have nothing but art in that empty head of yours!”

“H-hey!” Toyofusa sputtered. “Well, you must know how I feel! You’re a man too!”

Hakutaku shrugged. “Who, me? I’m a spirit. I’m neither a man nor a woman.”

“Oh, Hakutaku-sama!” Oyuki gasped, batting her eyelids. “I knew I could always count on you!”

Toyofusa frowned helplessly. “P-please, I swear to the heavens that Oyuki is the only one for me!”

Oyuki and Hakutaku burst into laughter and didn’t stop for a few minutes. Then, after they had finished, Hakutaku said softly, “Oh, we were only joking. There truly is no other loving couple like you two.”

At these words, the elderly man and woman looked at each other, and their cheeks burst into a startling rosy shade. As quickly as their gazes had met, they turned away out of embarrassment.

After spending a few days resting at the Sano residence, Hakutaku could say that he was back in good health, far better than he had been on the night he arrived. He had also grown quite close to the Sanos and figured that it was now a suitable time for his portrait to be drawn. However, Oyuki still would not give him permission. According to the woman, Hakutaku was still not in peak form, but every time he tried to figure out why, he would only draw blanks.

“Why won’t she let me?” he sighed.

“Why indeed?” Toyofusa sighed too. Just like on the other nights, he was back on the engawa waiting for more spirits to appear. The two sat together in the

moonlight while the chirruping of insects rang through the air, mulling over Oyuki's obstinance as they sipped on alcohol cooled by water from the well and ate cold tofu topped with spring onion and bonito flakes.

"When *will* she let me sit for a portrait, then?" Hakutaku grumbled.

Toyofusa chuckled. "Well, it's up to her... No, I would actually say it's up to you. She did mention that it's all in the mind."

"The mind, huh..." Hakutaku trailed off. "That reminds me, she told me something about each one of us having something that only we can do."

"Words like riddles," the artist mused.

"They truly are!" Hakutaku exclaimed. "I don't get it at all and I'm the beast who's supposed to know everything."

Toyofusa glanced at the spirit as he pouted. "Well, I don't know what's going on in your life, but since you're such a prestigious beast, I'm sure you have a lot to deal with as well. At the very least, I'm glad to see you getting along with Oyuki. You're free to stay with us as long as you like."

"O-oh... Thank you," Hakutaku stammered, casting an uncertain glance to the sky. The being opened his mouth as if he had more to say, then shut it, opened it again, and finally closed it. Part of him was tempted to spill his heart, but the louder part of his mind thought that he could not disclose it so easily. And he was afraid that if he shared his deepest truth, then things would change. These people were so kind to him, and they believed wholeheartedly that he was a grand beast of good omens. What would they think of him if they discovered what was on his mind?

The thought of it was too terrifying to even contemplate.

The air was thick with humidity. Being the height of summer, it was not a cold night at all, but Hakutaku felt the chill on his skin, nevertheless.

*Perhaps it is because I am a coward,* he thought sadly.

"There is no need to rush yourself," a gentle voice said, breaking him out of his despondence. "Take as much time as you need."

Hakutaku whipped his head around to see who had spoken. It was Oyuki, with



more alcohol for the two held in her hands.

“As Toyofusa-sama has suggested, you only need to think about recovering for the moment.”

“B-but...!” Hakutaku spluttered in a desperate protest that fizzled out as soon as it started. His shoulders drooped in dejection. “I’m Hakutaku, the auspicious beast. I was sent here from the heavens to give humans the aid they need, and yet here I am, lounging and lazing about.”

“Oh, I recall you saying something similar the other day,” Oyuki said as she filled Toyofusa’s empty cup with more to drink. As she did so, she tilted her head in mild uncertainty. “But did someone specifically tell you to do that?”

“Um... No, not really,” Hakutaku faltered. It was a simple question, and yet the spirit found himself struggling to answer it properly. He forced his best smile and tried to pretend that he still had a grip on the matter.

“But I’m not just any random being. I’m an auspicious beast with great power and knowledge, you know? So...I need to use those things for good. It’s just what I’m meant to do.”

Considering how shaken he was, he thought that he had made a convincing argument. However, Oyuki didn’t seem convinced, and her head remained tilted.

“How strange. You say that it’s something you’re *meant* to do, not something you *want* to do. If it is only a job to you, why not let someone else handle it?”

“H-hey, Oyuki!” Toyofusa blurted out. “That is a very rude thing to say to Hakutaku-sama!”

Despite her husband, Oyuki stood her ground and continued. “Saving the world is certainly a tremendous feat for anyone to achieve. However, I believe that for anyone to do something great and leave their name behind, they must perform that act of their own volition.”

She stared deep into Hakutaku with her large, brown eyes, which seemed to tremble and shine in the moonlight.

“Take Toyofusa-sama, for example. Day after day, all he thinks about is what

*he* wants to do. That is the kind of attitude you need to achieve greatness.”

Hakutaku laughed dryly, taken aback by Oyuki’s words. “I must admit, I was expecting a little more after your rather dramatic speech. You just wanted an excuse to show off your husband, didn’t you?” he said with a shrug.

“That’s correct,” Oyuki said, giggling, her mirth growing stronger with each laugh. Toyofusa turned red as a lobster, close to tears.

“Oyuki, you cheeky...!” he protested.

“Oh ho ho! My apologies,” she smiled. “I never get the chance to brag about you like this out in the open, so I couldn’t help myself.”

As the couple continued their friendly argument, Hakutaku remained silent, deep in thought. He must still have looked rather morose, because when he glanced at Oyuki’s chestnut eyes again and opened his mouth to speak, she caught his glance and stopped him with her words.

“There is no need for you to answer straight away,” she assured him. “You can take all the time you need, remember?” She beamed at him kindly and continued: “It’s not easy to discover or admit who you are. We humans need immense courage for that too.”

Hakutaku felt his face crumple and his heart squeeze at the woman’s encouragement.

“You always know what to say,” he mused, and Oyuki chuckled.

“My father was quite the established artist too,” she said. “I have seen many extraordinary works since I was a child, so I am quite confident that my ability to tell truth from falsehood is honed like no other.”

“Oh?” Hakutaku said. “So you mean to imply that I am not genuine?”

“No, I said nothing of the sort,” Oyuki countered. “Or do *you* mean to tell me that you think, in your heart, that you are a fake?”

Hakutaku fell silent, unable to find a reply.

Then, Toyofusa, who had lost the thread of the conversation, interjected. “What’s all this, you two? Come on, drink, drink! We can leave the difficult conversations for later.” He filled the cups with a few splashes of alcohol, and

Hakutaku took his, sipping gingerly at it. The beverage was of fine quality, and yet its bitterness on his tongue was so sharp that it broke down his mental defenses.

“I don’t understand,” he whimpered. “I don’t understand anything at all.”

Oyuki heard this and replied, sounding as if she were only talking to herself: “We are here for you whenever you need us.” She didn’t specify the purpose, but she didn’t need to. Hakutaku nodded back, letting the cries of the nocturnal insects ring in his ears, clear as the chime of a bell. He shut his eyes, using the darkness to peer inside of himself.

“Women sure can be scary...” Toyofusa mumbled, and the tiniest of objections popped into Hakutaku’s head, but he decided to remain silent.

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*“You can take all the time you need, remember?”*

Oyuki’s words had been kind, but not without their sternness, and that was precisely what made them resonate with Hakutaku so much. Something about the way she spoke so readily convinced you before you had the chance to argue back.

During his stay at the Sanos’ home, Hakutaku often found himself on the brink of tears, but only because Oyuki’s words made such a profound impact on him, seeping into the deepest cracks in his heart, and only because Toyofusa offered him smiles overflowing with so much kindness and affection. Now that he stopped and thought about it, he realized that in all his life as an auspicious beast he’d never stayed so close to anyone and for so long. Even back when he had encountered Huangdi, the ruler had always kept a certain distance between them, like it was the obvious and appropriate thing to do for a heavenly messenger such as Hakutaku.

But now, Toyofusa and Oyuki were like family to him. And what a warm thing it was to have people you could call family. It was something that only the weak of heart could do, a closeness that sprang from humans’ instinct to gather and overcome their imperfections. The great beast Hakutaku had never needed this. He’d always been strong enough by himself. But then, why did he find himself yearning so longingly for such a connection? Why did it call out to him like

nothing else? And why, oh why, did he find it so dazzling and wonderful?

What was making his heart ache when he saw how loving the old couple were?

Bit by bit, as Hakutaku spent more time living at the Sano residence, his heart began to open. It was not an easy process by any means. It took one full year for him to fully trust Toyofusa and Oyuki, and another for him to believe that they would not abandon him if he were to let his more vulnerable side slip out into the open. And, to muster up the courage to bare his truth to them, he needed yet another year.

So, in the end, it took a total of three years for Hakutaku to confide his story to them. By this time, the continuation of *Gazu Hyakki Yako*, *Konjaku Gazu Zoku Hyakki*, had already been published.

“Could you please listen to what I have to say?” the spirit asked meekly, and the Sano couple gladly nodded.

It was a cloudless night, just like the night when the three had first met. They were sitting on the engawa outside as Hakutaku gradually began to open up about himself.

“These three years, I’ve thought long and hard about my mission and what it means to have a soul,” he said. He closed his eyes, as if trying to restrain his sorrow, but he pressed through his worries and continued.

“I still haven’t found my answer, though. That’s why I want to ask you two for your thoughts, and please don’t hold back. If I find my answer, I think I’ll finally be ready to sit for a portrait. Is that okay?”

The Sanos nodded.

Hakutaku gulped and took a deep breath, letting the soft glow of the moon calm him before he soldiered on.

“I think what I’ve been trying to do all this time is more than what I’m actually capable of. I’ve pushed aside my weaknesses in pursuit of something that’s much too big for me to hold on to, and that’s what’s caused my soul to break.”

When Hakutaku looked down at his feet, all he could see was a mountain of corpses—the humans he had failed to save in the past. They were miserable and drenched in blood, with maggots crawling out of the gaping cavities where their limbs used to be. Their eyes were dull and lifeless, rolled to the skies that they would never see again.

Hakutaku wished more than anything that he could have saved them all, and yet he had let all these lives slip through his fingertips. Their deaths were nobody's fault, least of all Hakutaku's; he did not have sole responsibility over them. However, he could not so easily quash his faith in Huangdi's *Hakutaku-zu*, which had grown out of control.

“And look at me. I've lost the white coloring that is meant to be the mark of an auspicious beast.”

Since ancient times, beasts with white fur had been taken to be good omens, and that included Hakutaku, the white bovine. But if anyone were to look at him now, they would find it very difficult to spot any white coloring on him.

“I've lost it because...I failed the mission I was tasked with and that was my punishment.”

It had happened one spring, in a year long lost to time.

Once Huangdi had completed the *Hakutaku-zu* with the spirit's help, he began to distribute it throughout the nation, and it helped save many people from calamities wrought by demons and other supernatural beings. Hakutaku heard nothing but praise and gratitude for it, and his heart brimmed with satisfaction and happiness.

And as his heart blossomed, so did the nation before his eyes. Huangdi's country was beautiful, sprouting flowers with every season, each tree bearing fruits wherever it could. Villages all over were filled with peals of laughter, and Hakutaku felt proud of himself for bringing such visibly peace to the land. But the world was a harsh place, and its cruel severity would soon strike him. Every time the memories came flooding back, he wondered why he couldn't have understood it sooner.

One day, lured by peach blossoms, Hakutaku visited a village tucked away in the mountains and met a young girl there.

“Hello!” she greeted him. “Have you come to play and see the village’s peach blossoms? They’re pretty, aren’t they?”

She beamed, her smile every bit as beautiful as the flowers she boasted of and as sweet as their tangy scent. Hakutaku introduced himself, saying that he was an auspicious beast, and her eyes flew open.

“Really?” she gasped. “Well, you do have those cow horns on your head! And three eyes too. You really must be the messenger from heaven that gave us the *Hakutaku-zu*! I have to tell Mother and Father!”

She grinned bashfully again, a pinkish blush rising in her cheeks as she watched Hakutaku with glittering admiration.

The villagers gave him a grand welcome, and it was the most blissful experience he could remember before he became preoccupied with his mission to save the world. He loved the village so much that he swore he would see them again before he departed.

But when he did return a few months later, he was met with sprawling, unspeakable horror.

The village had become even less than a shell of itself. Every trunk in what used to be its magnificent peach forest had been felled to the ground. Plumes of smoke climbed up to the sky from countless spots across the landscape. It didn’t take him long to realize that they were rising from piles of human remains, the leftovers of lives lost to illness. The villagers who had managed to survive all wore grave expressions, staring endlessly at their scarred homeland.

Among them was the girl who had greeted him before.

Her eyes, once as clear and bright as a lake in spring, were now clouded over and unfocused. The rosininess of her cheeks was obscured by soot, and her body looked frail. She cradled the dead bodies of her parents in her thin arms, crying as she clung to them.

The village had been struck by a plague bringer called Yadoyuko. Although the *Hakutaku-zu* described how to exterminate it, the villagers had not correctly understood the information.

“What...? How? How did this happen?” Hakutaku gulped, unable to grasp the

situation. He rushed over to the girl.

“Why didn’t you come and save us...?” she whispered, and Hakutaku swallowed his breath. He thought he saw a dark flicker in her round eyes, eyes that now swirled with the murkiness that had been stewing with despair, grief, sorrow, and rage in her heart. The girl, once so innocent, now stared at him with an intense resentment that made him falter in his steps. He had never been looked at with such hatred, and it horrified him.

In his terror, all he could manage was a timid squeak as he backed away from the girl. Panic overtook him, and he turned on his heel and ran away from the village. He wasn’t trying to escape the horrific reality, though; he wanted to seek Huangdi’s help.

But Huangdi did not share his sentiment, and he refused Hakutaku’s plea. He ordered for the village to be sealed off and whatever was left to be burned.

“There would be no stopping the sickness if it were to spread further. As the ruler of this nation, I have a duty to protect other people too. And to do that, we must eliminate that village—entirely,” he declared.

They were to sacrifice a few to save many. Hakutaku found himself unable to protest Huangdi’s orders, because he knew in his infinite wisdom that it was the best course of action.

From this moment on, he began to see the world with completely different eyes. He realized that this nation, which he had once seen as beautiful, was built on a foundation of people who had been left for dead, leaving behind only their bones and regrets to build a mountain atop which Huangdi stood as ruler.

It was too much to bear for the purehearted beast.

His mind went blank as he took off again, trying to reach the village as fast as his body could travel. If he could at least save the girl, then he would do anything to keep her safe. It was the one prayer that hammered on his mind.

When he finally arrived at the village, he saw that it was already enveloped in scarlet flames.

“Where... Where is she?!” Hakutaku yelled. He searched every corner for her to no avail, until he arrived at one particular spot.

There she was, the face for which he had searched so desperately, lying in a pile with the rest of the dead, a hollow reminder of what she once had been.

The shock took all the strength from Hakutaku's legs, and his knees hit the ground.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!!!" he howled. He felt something heavy cloak his back, and he froze. He realized that he was covered in a cold sweat, and he stiffly turned to see what was behind him. Of course, he knew in his rational mind that there was nothing there, and yet he could make out the silhouettes of those who had passed. They all had darkened eyes like the girl's, filled with the murk of the human heart. They pushed against him as if they were trying to crush him, wailing and groaning in pain.

"Why didn't you come and save us?" they moaned.

"Please forgive me!" Hakutaku cried. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry...!" He curled up into a ball and clutched his head as he pleaded.

The acrid smoke prickled at his nose, and he could taste the foulness of burnt flesh on his tongue. It was hard to breathe through the stench, and he found himself unable to move from the burden of the lost lives weighing on him. All he could manage was to tremble like a quivering leaf, until a small hand reached out to him. It was the girl... No, it was something that only *resembled* her.

"Why didn't you come and save us?" it croaked.

Hakutaku felt his heart collapse.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!" His scream pierced the air like a glass shattering. He froze, unable to move, like the earth had wrapped itself around his legs and taken him prisoner. He had thought he was omnipotent because he came from the skies. He'd believed in his ignorance that he had enough power to save everyone, but the *Hakutaku-zu* was merely a book, and books did not offer much in terms of salvation. Yet Hakutaku had let hubris cloud his ambition and fool himself into believing that he could do much more than what was possible.

He shut his three eyes and let his tears fall from them, praying that they would drown out the hopeless reality he had caught himself in, but all that



flowed forth in endless waves were his regrets, despair, and sadness.

Eventually, his mind went as numb as his body, and even as the sun rose and fell and the winds blew and the rain poured, he never budged from his all-consuming grief. There Hakutaku remained, year after year after year, his anguish as fresh as the day it shot through his heart. Any human would have given up long ago, at least out of exhaustion, but he *wasn't* human.

The colorless ash from the flames settled on him, and as time marched on, it eventually turned to dirt, sowed with the seeds carried by the winds and the birds that flew above. The seeds eventually sprouted into saplings, and years turned to decades and then to centuries as Hakutaku was engulfed by the nature around him.

He did not know how many seasons had come and gone, or how many dynasties had risen and fallen. He'd forgotten even his duty to save lives, and as if to taunt his disgrace, blood continued to be spilled across the lands.

But one day, he suddenly awoke.

When he opened his eyes, the landscape around him was totally unfamiliar. Not a single trace of the village he mourned could be seen, and the smell of the greenery was so thick it almost choked him. He pulled himself out of the earth with great effort, slow like a snail, and brushed off the dirt and grass that was stuck to him.

As he took his first proper breath of air, he was struck by the vibrant green that his hair had become. It was then that he realized the heavens had taken away his signature trait that showed the world that he was an auspicious beast.

Toyofusa blinked, so absorbed in Hakutaku's story that he had forgotten to breathe. As Hakutaku finally paused his uninterrupted retelling, the artist finally took a deep breath. Oyuki, who was seated beside him, remained deep in thought.

"So then, you came to Japan?" Toyofusa asked.

"Yes... More accurately, I ran away to here. Embarrassing, huh?" Hakutaku replied.

“Not at all. Anybody would have wanted to,” Oyuki said, breaking her silence. “Why did you wake from your slumber? Couldn’t you just have ended things there?”

As harsh as that question was, Hakutaku knew that she was aiming at something deeper. He raised his head to meet Oyuki’s eyes, determined to give her a sincere answer.

“Simple,” he said. “I couldn’t shake my desire to save someone, anyone.” Those feelings had never been beaten out of his heart, gleaming like a surviving spark in a mound of ash. Although he had been consumed by the despair of letting so many lives be lost, he never could stop hearing the call that beckoned him to save more, almost like it was hell’s way of punishing him. That was why he came to these islands. He figured that in a country so much smaller than the mainland he had come from, there must be someone he could save.

Yet he had found himself at an impasse with no evil-warding portrait to show and no future to envision for himself. He felt stuck, like he was trapped in a dead end.

“What should I do?” he asked. “I’m supposed to be Hakutaku, the beast who was created to save lives. But now I’ve lost my white hair and my heart was crushed by just one failure. Nothing I ever do comes out right...” As he spoke, his eyes grew wet with tears. He was sad, but more than that, he couldn’t stop thinking about how pathetic he was, lost without a solution or a way out.

Oyuki sighed. Looking straight into Hakutaku’s watery eyes with a kind gaze, she smiled gently.

Her lips parted, and she made an outrageous proposal: “May I suggest you stop being Hakutaku, then?”

“Wha—?!” Toyofusa’s jaw dropped as his eyes bulged in surprise, unable to speak. Hakutaku was similarly shocked, but Oyuki put her sleeve to her mouth and giggled innocently.

“Your heart has been crushed, and you’ve also lost your white coloring. At this point, why not simply do whatever you please?”

“Wait, wait...” Hakutaku faltered. “Come again?”

“I am suggesting you throw away that name of yours,” Oyuki said.

Hakutaku shivered from a chill only he could feel. “You’re joking, aren’t you?” he gulped.

Oyuki’s smile remained on her lips, and she shook her head.

“I am most serious. If that name is too heavy to bear, then it will do you good to throw it away and make something new for yourself. Something that you can carry.”

“I-I can’t do that. I am Hakutaku. I was *born* Hakutaku, *created* Hakutaku. If I were to throw that name away, what would I even have left?!” His voice escalated as he trembled, but Oyuki remained calm and nonchalant as ever, laughing and speaking with a steady voice as she always did.

“What you would have left is a person. Just like me.”

“Like you...?”

“Yes. I have no special power or talent that will allow me to leave my name in history, but here I am, alive. Special people tend to forget that there are more ordinary people in this world than extraordinary ones.”

“But even if I did abandon my name, I still wouldn’t know what to do with myself,” Hakutaku frowned.

“It’s important to find out what you *are* capable of and what your heart wants,” Oyuki continued past Hakutaku’s mumbled excuses. “I put my utmost into protecting this house, supporting this family, and doing whatever I can to help Toyofusa-sama.” She gazed at her husband lovingly as she spoke. “At the same time, that is my heart’s desire. Who else is there but me to pull Toyofusa-sama up when he becomes discouraged?”

“Hey, you don’t have to bring that up now,” Toyofusa grimaced, but Oyuki only giggled.

“What do you desire now?” she asked Hakutaku. “Do you have a wish you want granted, aside from saving people?”

“A wish...” Hakutaku blinked. He hadn’t expected to be asked that. He stared back at the elderly couple.

He felt a pang in his chest. With someone like Oyuki by his side, maybe he would not have been worn down so much. It slowly dawned on him that he had been missing something vital, even more important than his capabilities or his soul. And as this truth rose to the surface, the clenching feeling in his heart grew stronger.

“I wish...” he gulped. “I wish I had a family.”

More than anything, he wanted a people who would stay with him no matter what, support him through tough times, and journey together through bitter reality. People who would join him in life with smiles on their faces.

From the moment he entered the mortal realm, he had been alone. Perhaps he even felt that it was necessary for him to have been made this way and led himself to believe that his fate, even duty, was to live a life of solitude.

So then, what if he *weren't* Hakutaku?

There was no need for him to hold back anymore.

“I want someone who will let me lean on them when I can't stand by myself. Someone who I can give my all to when they need it,” he said. He could feel the loneliness he had been harboring for so long prickling in his eyes as hot tears, and they grew and grew until they spilled over, glistening in the cold moonlight.

“Make a ring with your arms, please,” Oyuki said. Hakutaku wasn't sure what she was getting at, but he obeyed regardless. He formed a round space with his arms, and Oyuki looked into it, her eyes filled with love.

“This ring is just like the vessel of your heart,” she said. “And when you find the people that you would like to let into your heart, then you will have met your family.”

“People to let into my heart...” Hakutaku whispered.

“Yes, that's where you should begin. Let yourself worry and fuss over those close to you and focus all your energies on that. Then, you will find salvation before long.”

“Really?” Hakutaku said, his heart pounding as Oyuki's words reverberated within him. He felt his body growing warmer as he thought, *Am I even allowed*

*to hope for such a thing?*

He clenched his fist. No, this was for him to decide. He shouldn't need anyone else's permission.

"I didn't know just how fragile I was. I was so lost. So, so lost..."

But he didn't have to feel lost for much longer. After all, he had two people right in front of him with whom he'd spent three entire years.

"Don't worry!" Toyofusa exclaimed. "We're right here with you. You can talk to us about anything you want."

"And I would like to help you with anything you need," Oyuki added. "We are, after all..." she snuck a glance at Toyofusa. "...We are friends, aren't we?" he finished. "I mean, look at how long we've been together now. There's no need to be shy!"

The trickle of Hakutaku's tears began to pour like a waterfall as the couple's kindness stung his heart, and his breath caught in his throat.

"Wahhhhhh! You're... You're both too kind to me! Stupid! *Stupiiiiiiiiidd!!!*" he wailed like a baby.

"My, my, my," Oyuki gasped, offering the spirit a hand towel as quickly as she could.

"Does this mean I can do that portrait now?!" Toyofusa gasped, bolting to his feet. He cobbled together some paper and a brush, readying them in his hands and staring at Hakutaku, whose face had turned a bright red from sobbing so much.

"N-no! Stop!" Hakutaku panicked. "Not now!"

"I've waited three long years for this! I can't wait any longer!"

"What? Oyukiiiiii!"

The woman harrumphed. "My! Whatever will I do with you two?"

The energy of the three friends filled the moonlit night.

And so, Hakutaku decided to give up his name. In his last act as the auspicious beast, he allowed Toyofusa to draw his portrait, but he refused to show his

tearful face and would not look straight at the artist for the picture. This is why the book Toriyama Sekien published two years later, *Konjaku Hyakki Shui*, features an illustration of Hakutaku posed with his tail toward the reader, but that's neither here nor there.

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Time marched on, and nature continued to change its seasonal coats. However, the friendship of the three could not continue for long. Not because they clashed but simply because all humans run out of time sooner or later. In the year 1788, the curtains closed on the life of Sano Toyofusa, the artist known as Toriyama Sekien. After watching her husband pass, Oyuki also followed a few days later.

Once he saw his friends off, Hakutaku moved to the spirit realm with Nurarihyon's help. He retired his original name and took up medicine, using the knowledge he'd gained to start an apothecary. He never ended up giving himself a new name—the other spirits came to call the former auspicious beast Noname, and the being once known by “he” became a being known as “she.”

A lot had happened since she came to the spirit realm. She'd met Shinonome and Toochika the kappa and taken in a tiny little creature that had wandered her way into the world of spirits. She'd learned the joy and love of having a family, just as the previous stories have told.

And in her new life, there was one incident in particular that shocked her.

Shortly after she moved to the spirit realm, a man came knocking at her apothecary one early morning. She answered him fresh from her slumber, still rubbing the sleep from her eyes but awake enough to tell that he had messy black hair and sanpaku eyes with the right one slightly clouded over. He looked young, somewhere in his mid-thirties, and he wore a fedora with a flashy haori. Noname did not recognize him, and yet she couldn't shake the feeling that she had met him before...

“W-wait,” she gasped. “What...? How?!” The realization knocked all the words out of her, but the man only tipped his hat as he greeted her.

“Long time no see, Hakutaku.”

“Toyofusa...? How are you here?” Noname had seen her friend, Sano Toyofusa—the artist Toriyama Sekien—pass away. And yet here he was in the spirit realm and even younger than when they had met, at that. She had a mountain of questions that she wanted to ask him, but Toyofusa never divulged much detail.

“I go by Tamaki now. I came here because I thought you might be able to help me, seeing as you run an apothecary and all,” he said.

“Wh-what is it?” she asked. “I’d be glad to help you with anything I can. Just tell me.”

“Do you know how someone could make themselves *not* immortal?”

Noname said she didn’t, and Tamaki left, leaving her to ponder his request alone.

After this encounter, Noname and Tamaki would often cross paths through Shinonome, but they were never able to rekindle their friendship into what it had been before. Tamaki had seemingly built walls around himself, and while Noname craved his companionship, she figured that he must have his own reasons and never pursued it further.

However, things eventually changed.

After Kaori returned from Kagawa following the successful persuasion of Tasaburo-tanuki, she told Noname, “I think Tamaki-san’s plotting something, but he wouldn’t tell me what.” She said it offhandedly while giving Noname some souvenirs, but Noname felt that something was not right, especially with the rumors of the mermaid butcher. They had spread unusually quickly, and she found this to be very suspicious. Things in the spirit realm had also been more unstable than usual, to the point where even Nurarihyon was on alert. Considering the circumstances, it was even more alarming that Tamaki had secret plans. Mermaid meat could cure immortality, and there was no way that Tamaki, who had previously sought to rid himself of his own eternal life, would not be caught in this web.

“Kaori, would you mind telling me more?” Noname asked.

The ex-auspicious beast and the former artist were now being drawn closer

once again.

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*Klok. Klok. Ko-lok.*

As Tamaki walked the streets of the spirit realm, his geta clacked against the sidewalk. Now that the matter with Tasaburo-tanuki had been resolved and they were all back from Kagawa, the group had agreed on a short rest before heading off to Tochigi to see Tamamo-no-Mae. They were to leave tomorrow morning, but Tamaki, being a loner, did not have any particular place he wanted to visit during this break. He decided to get a drink somewhere before it was time to meet up in the morning, and so here he was, drifting about town.

As he wandered, he spotted a crowd gathered at a street vendor by the side of the main street. They were selling bells that could supposedly summon the mermaid butcher. Business seemed to be booming as they harped on the idea that, because the mermaid meat seller appeared with the ringing of bells, keeping one on your person was sure to increase your chances of drawing them to you.

Tamaki ambled over, and the fierce-looking oni who ran the stall flashed a fang-filled grin when he noticed the young man.

“Hey, my favorite story-seller! My wares are getting snapped up left and right, thanks to you!”

“...No need to thank me,” Tamaki said, giving him a crooked smile. He leaned into the vendor’s ear and whispered, “Have any spirits been coming back several times to buy bells?”

“Not recently,” the oni replied. “There was one that bought out my entire stock a few months ago, but that’s about it.”

Tamaki nodded without any further word, only taking an envelope from inside his haori and pressing it into the vendor’s hand.

“Ooh, you two look like you’re having fun! Can I join?”

Tamaki’s expression immediately fell into a grimace. He turned a stiff neck to confirm his suspicion, and his face scrunched as he saw the unmistakable spirit



he had been expecting to see.

“Can I help you, Noname?” he growled, and the other spirit gave him a big grin with her eyes shut in happy arches.

“Heh heh heh, I’m just gathering info because I heard that an old friend was up to a bit of no good!” she laughed. Tamaki heaved a huge sigh, unable to put up with her exaggerated actions.

On the outskirts of town, there was a popular soba noodle cart called Wind Chime Soba run by a Tsurube-otoshi spirit. Its eaves sported a checkered pattern, and two wind chimes dangled from its edges. The sign that said “nihachi soba” was worn and veritably ancient, and the scrumptious smell of tsuyu broth hung in the air surrounding the cart.

“Why do I have to eat soba with you?” Tamaki complained as Noname peppered her noodles with shichimi.

“Why not?” Noname said. “We used to eat our meals together every day, didn’t we?”

“...Enough about the past. It has nothing to do with the *present*,” Tamaki spat.

The other spirit slowly shook her head. “Nothing to do with the present, huh? Could you please at least listen to have what I have to say? I know you were the one who spread the rumors about the mermaid meat. And I know what I saw at that stall.”

Tamaki’s chopsticks stopped in their tracks, and he glared at Noname through his clouded eye. She, however, only returned a dry chuckle.

“You’ve always been bad at keeping secrets, you know. You’re easier to read than a book.”

“Shut up. This is none of your business,” he grumbled.

He turned away and slurped his noodles. Noname let out a small sigh.

“Why mermaid meat? What are you up to?”

“Leave me alone. I’m not going to cause any trouble, unlike a certain exorcist

we know. I'm just setting the stage for the final chapter of this story."

"You always say such bizarre things..." Noname frowned.

"If you don't like it, then don't listen," Tamaki shot back.

"Oh, I didn't say I didn't like it. I'm just stating the truth," Noname returned.

"Excuses, excuses." Tamaki wrinkled his nose, and the other spirit giggled. Despite their bickering, the mood was amicable. Their back-and-forth was even making Tamaki subconsciously miss the good old days of their past.

"Whatever you say," Noname said. But the peaceful atmosphere ended as she put her bowl down and grabbed Tamaki by the collar. She blinked furiously, her sudden anger making her shake.

"Don't give me that crap. How can I just leave you alone?!"

"H-hey, what's the big idea?" Tamaki coughed.

"Oh, you really want to know?" Noname seethed. "I've left you alone all these years because you saved my life and you didn't seem to want to talk about whatever's going on with you, so I didn't pry. But you've been acting so *weird* these last few years! Each thing you do is more extreme than the last. Remember what happened with Yao Bikuni? You got Kaori and our other friends involved and you didn't even seem to care!"

She stuck her face close enough to Tamaki's to see the cold beads of sweat running down it.

"What, are you going to get Kaori stuck in your little plan this time too?!" she thundered. "If you do, you'd better be prepared to sleep with one eye open."

Tamaki slid his glance away from Noname and lightly tapped the hand gripping his collar.

"You're always in that human girl's corner, aren't you?" he whispered.

Noname's face softened. "Of course. She's family."

"Right, right," Tamaki said. "She's just what you wanted, isn't she? Aren't you so glad that you fled here, abandoned your name, and quit being an auspicious beast? I guess running away really does pay off!"

*Slap!!!*

Tamaki felt a sharp pain sting his cheek. Noname was glaring daggers at him, pale and trembling with frustration. Her hand was raised.

“You don’t think I wish I could have solved my problems without running away?! I ran because I had no choice! You and your wife were the ones who told me it was okay to do that!”

A wave of tears surged forth, and her face grew red like a sulking child’s. Even Tamaki could not hide his surprise at the sudden overflow. He had been convinced that she was nothing like her old, weaker self anymore, and everyone who knew Noname of the apothecary thought she was stronger and more dependable than anyone. Many people wouldn’t even be able to picture her face all wet and messy like this.

“You still turn into a crybaby whenever you get emotional, huh?”

“Urgggghh... Get off my back. I’ve just been going through a lot recently!” She glowered at Tamaki and whispered, “I’m a mother now. I can’t let myself cry like I used to...”

“That’s true. You’ve really been trying your best,” Tamaki said.

Noname frowned, taken aback at his words. “I wouldn’t be here without everyone’s support, including yours. Don’t forget that.”

“...Right,” the man mumbled, a little lost for words.

“And I’m really grateful for that,” Noname continued. “Ever since I started raising a child as a mother instead of as a beast, my head’s been a big old mess! I’ve had to think about cooking meals, doing the laundry, how to put a child to sleep, how to educate her... All the hours in the day just go by in a flash. It’s exhausting, but I get to see my Kaori grow bigger and braver than she was the day before. Sometimes I miss when she was just a tiny little thing, but every day I realize that she’s more adorable than ever! I don’t feel like I’ve missed out on any of my own time at all. It’s been a tough journey, but so, so fulfilling.”

She placed a hand to her chest as if recalling all the precious memories she held inside, and as she did, she almost seemed to glow with warmth.

“And then, before I knew it, I found that I myself was being saved. My doubts and worries melted away, and I felt as if all the weight had been lifted from my shoulders. This must have been what Oyuki-san was talking about!”

*“Yes, that’s where you should begin. Let yourself worry and fuss over those close to you and focus all your energies on that. Then, you will find salvation before long.”*

Tamaki shut his eyes as he remembered Oyuki’s words. *Hakutaku the auspicious beast has really become a mother now*, he thought, and he let that sentiment sit in his mind.

He could so clearly imagine Oyuki showering her praise on Noname if she were here. Oyuki did worry a great deal for the spirit, and no doubt that she would have loved to see how much her friend had grown. However, she was already...

Noname grabbed Tamaki by the shoulders, and he snapped upward to see the glimmerfly light glittering in his companion’s amber eyes.

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, I can never thank you and Oyuki-san enough. And now, I want to do whatever I can to help you,” Noname said.

She paused, as if trying to push her words out before continuing.

“I can only think of one reason why you’re acting so desperate.”

Tamaki wriggled in shock.

“It’s got something to do with Oyuki-san, hasn’t it?” Noname said quietly.

The man tried to avert his gaze, but the spirit turned his face back and forced him to look into her eyes.

“Please, just tell me what it is. I want to repay you for what you gave me all those years ago. The only reason why I can lead the life I’m leading now, why I have a family to call my own, is because of you two. Let me help you!” Noname begged, tears pooling in her eyes as she spoke. Tamaki’s heart still wavered, and yet he couldn’t look away from those pale amber eyes as the droplets began to roll one after another without pause.

For a moment, he wondered if the tears of a full moon would look like this

too.

*“The moon is especially beautiful tonight, isn’t it?”*

The words once spoken by his beloved wife flashed into his mind.

“Oyuki...” Tamaki murmured. He heaved a sigh, gently lifted Noname’s hands from his face, and looked at her with new resolve.

“All right, fine. I’ll tell you everything,” he said.

“You will?!” Noname exclaimed.

“But,” Tamaki said, “if you really want to hear everything, then there’s no turning back. You’ll be going straight to hell with me.”

The spirit blinked, her eyelashes swooping up and down, and a grin broke over her face.

“Bring it on!” she demanded.

But her smile wouldn’t last for long. All the pain and secrets that Tamaki had shut away in his heart would wipe it off in one fell swoop.

“You’ve probably already guessed by now, but I’ve somehow become immortal,” he said.

Noname nodded. “Yeah. Otherwise, why would you be looking for a way to undo immortality?”

“A few weeks after I passed away, I climbed out of my own grave. I knew that I had died, so I had no idea why I was moving and breathing and looking decades younger.”

So why had Tamaki come back to life? The truth was that right before he died, someone had fed him mermaid meat. He knew who the culprit was right away: It was a Toriyama Sekien fanatic who returned after he had clawed his way out of his resting place and immediately launched into a rant about what a waste of talent it would have been for this world to lose Sekien. Tamaki, however, was not at all amused or impressed.

“I can no longer see out of my right eye, and the right half of my body doesn’t move like it used to. Must have been a side effect of the reverse aging,” he said.

“Oh no...” Noname gasped. “That’s the worst thing that could happen to an artist.”

Tamaki nodded. “Sano Toyofusa may have come back to life, but Toriyama Sekien is still dead.”

In his uncontrollable rage, he had picked up a nearby tombstone and beaten the culprit to death. He raised the stone into the air and brought it down over and over and over and over and over again as his anger remained unchecked. It was only when his victim had stopped moving that the tears finally started falling, and when he looked at the tombstone in his hands, he realized that the name etched into its surface was his late wife’s. He broke down again at the sight of it.

“I didn’t know what to do with myself, to be honest. I’d lost what little will I had and just wandered around aimlessly. I couldn’t find a way to continue living, so I tried to figure out how to make myself mortal again.”

His search took him beyond the borders of Japan to other countries across the sea. To make ends meet, he cobbled together stories he had picked up along the way and sold them to various patrons of the arts. That was how he became a story-seller, and how he eventually met Shinonome and Toochika. Eventually, two hundred fruitless years passed. However, just as he was becoming convinced that there was no way to reverse his immortality...

“I met Yao Bikuni, who had also been rendered immortal by mermaid meat. I approached her, hoping that she would have some information for me, but...”

In the end, he was unable to gain anything new from her, but he did learn something even more important.

“Did you know that the place she looks after is known as a resting spot for souls?”

“Of course,” Noname said. “It’s where human souls go to rest when they’ve rejected reincarnation. A lot of them never get reincarnated at all and end up as glimmerflies.”

A sudden thought bolted through her head, and her gaze flew to Tamaki’s eyes.

“Wait, don’t tell me...”

She felt herself become more tense by the second, and Tamaki returned her stare.

“Yes. Oyuki was there,” he said.

“What?! How?” Noname gasped.

“Apparently because of a promise she made me when she was still alive.”

Oyuki had refused to reincarnate when she saw that Toyofusa hadn’t entered the afterlife. She was determined to keep her promise to support him even in the next life, so she remained in that purgatory.

“She is so stubborn! Well, I guess I wouldn’t expect any less from Oyuki-san, but still...” Noname sighed.

“You can say that again.”

There are many reasons why someone may decide not to reincarnate, but only two options remain for those people. One is to finally accept reincarnation and return to saṃsāra; the other is to resign to become a glimmerfly.

“I had to kick myself into gear,” Tamaki said. “I had to die as soon as possible, but I still had no way to get rid of my immortality. So I figured my only hope was to ask the mermaid butcher, since they would be at the center of everything. That’s why I’m doing all this to lure them out.”

He’d been trying to meet the seller every step of the way. Teaching the Shirai family how to break an Inugami’s contract was part of the plan too, but it never ended the way Tamaki wanted. The mermaid butcher appeared not for him but for Seigen, who had fallen to rock bottom when Suimei ran away.

Tamaki paused. Noname pressed a hand to her forehead, trying to process everything that she had heard so far.

“Wait a minute. You mean to say that the whole mess with Seigen started because...”

“Of me, yes,” Tamaki clarified. “Well, I guess I only lit the first spark, but yeah.”

“You!” Noname exclaimed. “Oh, jeez, it’s not the time for that right now. All right, I get the picture. I’ll give you a hand, if only for Oyuki-san. I’ll make sure you get what you want.”

“...Thanks,” Tamaki smiled gently. For a moment, it was as if he was back to being Toyofusa again. Noname found herself breaking out into a happy grin too, but she quickly regained her composure.

“So, how’s your plan going? You’ve got things rolling pretty well already, I hope.”

“Of course. What do you think I’ve been spreading those rumors for?” Tamaki said. “Anyone who’s desperate enough is sure to buy those bells. And, actually, I think I’ve already pinpointed what kind of people the seller goes after. All we have to do now is wait.”

“Are you sure?” Noname asked. “Nobody likes a bad case of mistaken identity, you know.”

Tamaki chuckled dryly and pointed at his own nose.

“Don’t worry. I may be immortal with only half of my body in working order, but I’m still pretty good at sniffing out things. And mermaid meat smells so sickly sweet that I’m sure to flush that seller out straight away.”



## Chapter 3:

### What Comes after an Interspecies Marriage

**“D**O YOU MIND if I come along to help out this time?” Noname asked me out of nowhere on the day we were to depart for Tochigi Prefecture.

“Oh! Um, sorry, wasn’t expecting that. Yeah, of course,” I replied, surprised. I had been packing my bag with spare clothes in my room at the bookstore when she sprung that question on me.

“Great! Thank you,” Noname smiled. “Tamamo-no-Mae and I go way back. I haven’t seen her in a long time, so I thought this would be a good chance for me to pop by.”

She was holding a bundle of something in one hand. It looked like deep-fried tofu from the Tofu Boy’s shop that she probably planned to give as a gift. So thoughtful, as always.

“You and Tamamo-no-Mae are friends?” I raised my eyebrows. “I didn’t know that.”

“I met her when I had only just come to Japan,” Noname said. “We became good friends after that. I could probably put in a good word for you about Hakuzosu’s thing too.”

“...Oh.”

“Ah, right!” she exclaimed. “Also, Tamaki won’t be coming this time.”

“You saw him? When?” I asked.

“I saw him for just a little while last night. He said he can’t come because he’s busy, even though he said before that he would help! He just does whatever he wants, doesn’t he? What if I weren’t here to fill his spot?” Noname sighed.

I said nothing.

The spirit shrugged as she grumbled about Tamaki-san. I only stared back at her.

“What’s wrong? Why the silence?” she asked.

“Um...” I wondered if I should really say what was on my mind but decided I should get it out anyway. “It’s nothing, really, but it just kind of feels like you’re hiding something from me.”

“Pfft!” she spat with her whole body and started hacking and coughing. “How... H-how did you know?!”

“I know you too well, Noname. Even though you never like to talk about the past, you suddenly brought up the first time you came to Japan,” I pointed out. “And you’re not on the best of terms with Tamaki-san, but then you started talking like you were best friends?”

“My goodness!” she gasped, clasping her pale cheeks with both hands. “Did I really sound that obvious?”

“That’s not all,” I continued somewhat smugly. “You’ve got dark circles under your eyes *and* they’re bloodshot *and* your skin doesn’t look the best today. You must have been up to something last night,” I grinned. “You can’t fool your daughter, you know!”

Noname sagged and raised her hands in defeat. “I’m a total amateur when it comes to lying. I can’t be as sneaky as Tamaki!”

“Oh? So it has something to do with Tamaki-san,” I perked up and shot back without giving her a second to pause. “Is it connected to whatever he’s planning?”

Realizing what she had done, Noname clapped a hand over her mouth. As reliable as she usually was, my foster mother seemed to be a terrible liar. And it was no surprise since no surprise party had ever remained a surprise when she was around. Her ditzy tendency to slip up on these things was part of what made her so cute, though.

“Not that it really matters,” I shrugged, returning to my packing. “Let me know if there’s anything I can help you with, though.”

Noname cocked her head, puzzled. “You don’t think it’s going to be anything bad? I mean, it *does* involve Tamaki.”

I stared at her blankly for a second, then chuckled a little. “What are you talking about? You know how to tell good from bad, don’t you?”

Even though we’d been together since I was a small child, Noname still sometimes had trouble with the obvious questions.

“I trust you, Noname. I know you’ll make the right decision. We’re family, aren’t we?”

“Kaori...” Her big, round eyes trembled, and she swept me into a hug. She embraced me with such force that I wondered whether something had shaken her, but those suspicions faded as quickly as they had entered my mind. Her flushed cheeks and her scrunched eyebrows were filled not with pain but with joy, and that made the tears wavering and falling from her eyes look so beautiful.

I reached my hands around her and gave her a gentle pat on the back, trying to calm her emotional overflow, but she only squeezed me closer.

“I’m so happy,” she whispered, her voice hoarse. “I never even knew I could feel so much joy.”

When I raised my head to look at her, she was back to her old self.

“Thank you, Kaori,” she said. “I’ve been wondering whether to do this, but... I’ll tell you everything.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Of course. I want you to know. I don’t want to hide anything from my precious family.”

“...Okay.” Seeing her resolve, I nodded back. “But you know, just because we’re family doesn’t mean you can’t have your own secrets, y’know!” I jabbed.

Noname blinked at me, thinking, then broke into a smile. “And that’s what I love about you,” she laughed cheerily.

She then told me all about how she used to be a renowned auspicious beast, and about the people who took care of her and saved her. And, of course, about the danger that those people now found themselves in.

“So, I’ve decided to help lure out the mermaid butcher. I need to help Tamaki

pass on,” she said.

“I see...”

It was a lot for me to take in. The weight of death twisted my heart in a painful grip, but Noname must have been in a lot more pain than me. The time I had spent with her, compared to the time she had spent with Tamaki, was practically dust in the wind.

I swallowed back the emotions that were trying to force their way up and asked, “Do you have a way of drawing them out, then?”

“Well...” she began, but a voice called out as someone descended the stairwell.

“Good morning, Kaori-chan! It’s time to head over to Tochigi!”

“I’m so tired...”

“Hey, Tsukiko! You can’t sleep here!”

It was Konoha and Tsukiko. I opened my mouth to call back to them, but Noname stopped me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, confused.

Her face darkened. “We think that the mermaid butcher will go to her next.”

“What? Who...?”

“The mermaid butcher only appears to people who are backed into a corner by one thing or another—like Seigen. Which means...”

“Kaori-chan? Are you there?” Konoha called again. I looked to Noname, and the somber look she wore on her face made my emotions clump in my throat.

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We set off with Konoha and Tsukiko and soon found ourselves in Tochigi Prefecture. We were headed for the Sessho-seki, also known as the Killing Stone, which was said to have a significant connection with Tamamo-no-Mae. It was located near the hot-spring town of Nasu Yumoto, in a famous national park that saw crowds upon crowds of tourists. According to legend, the Sessho-seki was the transformed corpse of Tamamo-no-Mae, and now all that

remained of the nine-tailed fox was her spirit, which still dwelled within the grounds. There used to be a volcano that would endlessly spew poisonous gas too. Inspired by his trip here, the famous poet Matsuo Basho wrote this in *Oku no Hosomichi*:

*The Sessho-seki sat in the dark shadow of the mountain near a hot spring, its poisonous gases lingering and never dispersing. The corpses of bees, butterflies, and other insects covered the ground and rendered the sand beneath them invisible.*

The Sessho-seki wasn't called the Killing Stone for nothing. How blessed we were to have modern knowledge about volcanic gases so we could avoid the kinds of casualties that must have happened often in the olden times! Although there also seemed to be less of it these days, the unique atmosphere surrounding the stone was still ever-present. The greenery grew thick all over the mountain, and yet there was no life in the area immediately surrounding the stone, like a big chunk had been taken out of it. The stench of sulfur hanging in the air and the drab, rocky landscape made for quite the dreary scene. It was very depressing to look at, but that may also have been due to my sunken mood.

Unlike me, however, Konoha and Tsukiko seemed to be in high spirits.

"Oh, it stinks! Doesn't it smell awful here, Tsukiko?" Konoha puffed.

"It's sulfur, based on the odor of rotten eggs." The tanuki pointed. "Oh, look. Those are so cute."

"Wait, cute?" The fox looked where her friend was pointing. "The Thousand Jizo Statues are *cute*? I'd say they look more terrifying than anything..."

"There are so many of them...!" Tsukiko's voice trailed off. "Surely I could take one and no one would notice..."

"No! Absolutely not!" Konoha cried. "It's going to watch you while you sleep and lay a curse on you!"

“Wow, it moves at night too?” Tsukiko giggled. “That’s even cuter...”

“Tsukiko, no! The world is not ready for your weird tastes!”

As I watched the two of them continue their friendly banter, I let out a heavy sigh. I felt awful just looking at Konoha.

I quietly put some distance between my companions and myself. The information Noname had given me still hung over my mind like a looming shadow. It was just so much to process, especially when I’d never heard anything about Noname’s past, or the fact that Tamaki-san was immortal. My new knowledge was overflowing faster than I could catch it, and there were still some things that I had trouble wrapping my head around.

“If the mermaid butcher appears before Konoha, wouldn’t that mean our current plan has failed?” I mumbled to myself. The seller only showed themselves to people who were in despair, but Konoha didn’t look like she had reached that point yet. If anything, she was doing her best to make her love come true. But even so, maybe she had already given up on changing Hakuzosu’s mind and was planning her next move?

That made sense on paper, but she would be turning to the wrong person for help. Mermaid meat wasn’t something to take lightly; Tamaki-san and Yao Bikuni both proved that.

“But people who are desperate often lose sight of what’s right...”

It’s easy to miss something that would seem obvious to an outsider. It could happen to anyone. What you would need then is someone else to pull you back and ground you. We could all use someone like that in our lives when the going gets tough.

*For example...*

“Are you all right?”

*...someone like Noname.*

She had worry written all over her face. She was so honest about her compassion for others that it made me smile.

“It’s a lot of information to take in all of a sudden, isn’t it?” she said.

“Yeah, it really is. But I’m doing okay,” I told her, although I was still trying to put on a strong front for her. I took a deep breath and pursed my lips. “Anyway, I’m going to talk to her first, at least. I know things are really tough for her right now, but I think jumping to mermaid meat would be the wrong move to make.”

“Yes, I agree,” Noname nodded. “I won’t stop her if she makes that decision once she’s given it some deep thought, though.”

I wasn’t going to rule out the possibility of mermaid meat, either. However, in exchange for granting any wish, it also had the side effect of immortal life. If someone were to choose mermaid meat after thinking carefully about that, then I wouldn’t stop them. But in Konoha’s case, I felt like eternal life wouldn’t be a good match with the inevitable fallout between her and her dad. That’s why I wanted to talk to her about this first.

As I watched Noname’s face, I felt a surge within me. This was no time to be feeling depressed when my friend could be at risk of ruining her life. I needed to get a grip on myself!

“In any case, we’re here to get Tamamo-no-Mae’s help. Best-case scenario, we get this whole thing wrapped up without anyone eating any mermaid meat. If things get really dire, we’ll think of a way out together.”

Noname nodded vigorously. “That’s the spirit. I’ve got my own ideas too, and I’m going to do whatever I can to help Tamaki and Oyuki-san as well. I can’t just leave them as they are.”

“Yeah. Let’s both do our best,” I said.

“Of course!”

We both grinned at each other, but suddenly, I was struck with a question.

“Speaking of, now that we’re here at the Sessho-seki, where does Tamamo-no-Mae live, anyway?” I tilted my head in thought.

“Oh, right,” Noname frowned. “She was supposed to come and meet us... She’s quite late, isn’t she?”

As soon as the words left her mouth, the wind whipped around us, stirring up the sulfur stench so much that I wanted to pinch my nose. I spun around, trying

to see if the gases had somehow increased, and saw that a white fog had settled in.

And beyond the fog stood something that looked like a row of buildings.

“What is that?” I squinted, trying to get a better look, and as the buildings came into focus...the wind abruptly picked up again, whirling even faster than before and moving with such force that it was hard to breathe.

“Ack!” I cried, squeezing my eyes shut, trying to weather the sudden gale. When it finally weakened enough for me to open my eyes, I did a double take.

The fog, the sulfur, and even the grounds surrounding the Sessho-seki had all disappeared, and instead, I was met with the sight of an estate built in the style of shinden-zukuri architecture from the Heian period, fit for a family of nobles.

Its courtyard seemed to stretch forever, and it was elegant as it was large. I almost expected to see a noblewoman appear in the layered glory of a junihitoe kimono or a nobleman in a kariginu robe. I stood with my jaw agape, not knowing what to say. Then, I noticed a little boy standing a small distance away, wearing a dark hanjiri robe with a pair of matching hakama. He was the very image of a child from a patrician family, his eyes shining with the light of a bright mind. The next thing I noticed was that he had a pair of fox ears atop his head, twitching and listening.

“Welcome, esteemed guests,” he greeted us. “Our lady has been expecting you.”

I looked at Noname, and she looked at me. We both gulped nervously.

“Why did Noname get taken to another room?”

“Maybe because she’s Tamamo-no-Mae’s friend? Hopefully, she won’t be taken to the kitchen to be diced and cooked...?”

“Konoha, please control your imagination.”

“Yeah! Don’t think of weird things like that!”

Konoha, Tsukiko, and I had been brought to a room within the estate, and now we were sitting on tatami mats bordered with korai-patterned binding,



huddled together and trembling like lost, frightened kittens.

As if the palace-like mansion wasn't intimidating enough, the room was also partitioned with silk kicho panels and huge folding screens. Part of it had also been furnished with misu bamboo curtains that looked very expensive. It seemed that the space beyond it belonged to *her*: Tamamo-no-Mae, the nine-tailed fox with the golden fur, a spirit whose wickedness was matched only by her legendary status throughout the ages.

She originally came from China, having first possessed a woman called Daji, the concubine of the Shang Dynasty's King Zhou. Then, she took on the identity of Lady Kayo, another concubine, but this time to Magadha's Prince Hansoku. Sometime later, she returned to China and took the place of Bao Si, mistress of King You of the Zhou Dynasty. She had ruined many empires and kings with her beauty and cunning wit. Such was the lady fox Tamamo-no-Mae, whose history was filled to the brim with tales of trickery. She was the type of spirit who would gleefully sentence a thousand people to be beheaded, or clap and laugh as she watched criminals tap dance barefooted on burning copper poles.

She didn't let her reign of terror stop in China, though. She eventually made her way to Japan to curry favor with the emperors, both those in power and those retired, and sought to destroy Buddhism and hold the nation in the palm of her hand.

"We need to be careful not to upset her at any cost," I whispered.

"Right!" Konoha and Tsukiko nodded.

That was our top priority at the moment. If we made one wrong move, we might find our heads removed from the rest of our bodies. That thought put me intensely on edge.

A few minutes ticked by, then half an hour, then an hour. However, Tamamo-no-Mae didn't appear before us.

Our tension had long since dissolved, and we were beginning to feel foolish sitting in the great, empty room.

*Maybe this would be a good time to talk to Konoha,* I thought. I swallowed and decided that it was.

“Hey, Konoha?”

“Hm?” she returned, cocking her head, still sitting nervously.

*Whoa... She's so cute...* I caught myself thinking.

Anyone would agree that Konoha was a good-looking girl who had grown into a fine young woman, with an ethereal quality like a butterfly that had freshly emerged from its chrysalis. Her features were so perfect that artists would fight to capture her likeness. If I had to find a flaw, the only imperfection that could be seen on her was a small nick in her ear. However, I thought this small bit of asymmetry only served to accentuate her beauty. It made her more personable. Without it, she would seem too perfect and out of reach.

“What’s wrong? Why are you staring at me?” she giggled. As she laughed, the satin ribbon that she wore on her imperfect ear swayed.

*Crap, no! What am I doing?*

I shook my head. This was no time for me to be admiring Konoha! I needed to gather some very important information!

“Um, s-so! Is there anything troubling you at the moment?”

“...The fact that my father won’t approve of my boyfriend, I suppose?”  
Konoha answered.

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, that’d be it.”

Good grief, I was rotten at this. I wanted to shrivel up at what a stupid question that was. Worse, I couldn’t even think of what to ask next. If I were a detective, I’d probably get myself arrested with how bad I was. All I wanted to do now was break down and cry. *What do I do?!* I thought.

As my eyes began to water, Konoha changed the subject.

“Hey, Kaori-chan? Do you know about the mermaid butcher?”

“Wait, the one who everyone’s been talking about recently?! The one who can supposedly grant you any wish you want...?” I gulped.

“Oh, I know about that too,” Tsukiko perked up. “How wonderful. I have plenty of wishes I would love to have granted as well.” Her eyes sparkled from

behind her colored lenses.

*Tinkle.*

Konoha drew out a small object that chimed with a sweet sound. It was a little golden bell.

“I found a stall that was selling these a while ago. Apparently, you can use them to meet the mermaid butcher!” She shook it gently, and it tinkled brightly.

“I’m just using it as a sort of good luck charm right now,” she continued. “I only bought it because everyone was talking about it. You can have it if you want.”

“Oh... Thanks.” I took the bell almost on reflex and figured I should use this opportunity to try and drop my question casually.

“Hey, do you wish you could see the mermaid butcher?”

“Well, of course, if the rumor about them granting wishes is true,” she replied without hesitation. “I haven’t really given it much thought, though. I’m doing the best I can to make my wish come true with my own hands, after all.”

“I...see,” I said.

“Oh, right! What about you, Tsukiko? What wish would you want granted?” Konoha asked.

“I want to make a giant pudding in a bathtub,” the tanuki said.

“Oh, but the heartburn...”

“I’d be able to eat and swim at the same time. I could die happy then.”

Something didn’t seem right. Would the mermaid butcher really appear before Konoha like this? I watched the other two as they continued to chat. They didn’t seem any different from usual. I cocked my head in confusion. Noname and Tamaki-san’s theory sounded so wrong when I saw how Konoha was so straightforward and hardworking in her approach to love. She didn’t seem like the type to cling to fanciful tales.

“You’re so serious when it comes to love, Konoha. Your boyfriend must be a really wonderful guy,” I said without thinking.

Konoha's face suddenly turned a deep red, like the sunset. "Whaaat?! Kaori-chan, wh-what are you saying?!" she stammered. She was blushing even on her ears and her neck. She'd been knocked out of her calm composure so much that even her gray eyes began to water. Her hands, balled up into small fists, were flushing lightly too. She looked just like an adorable, tiny little animal in her embarrassment. I wanted to protect her so badly!

"Konoha... You're sooo cute!" I squealed. She let out a small yelp and tried to hide her face in her hands.

I had to know what kind of guy would make such a cute girl fall so hard for him!

"Hey, can I ask how you met your boyfriend?" I gushed eagerly.

"What?!" Konoha paused, a little unsure, but she nodded.

"Oho! Now this I must hear. Please, do proceed."

Suddenly, we were very aware of a presence that made itself known with the sound of fabric on fabric. The misu curtain began to rise slowly, and we saw a woman leaning casually in her seat, looking down on us.

It was Tamamo-no-Mae.

She was as beautiful as the rumors said. Her bright eyes, like two black pearls, hid great wit behind them. They were accentuated with a small red flourish on the lower corners, and she had an allure that could strike down anyone's heart with even a single flirtatious glance.

Her clothes, too, were befitting of a lady of the manor. Her jet-black hair cascaded over the kochigi robes she wore. They were a fresh, spring green complemented by a pale, muted yellow, adorned with a circular paulownia pattern. From underneath peeked an itsutsuginu with a stylish summer pattern of orange fruits. Everything she wore on her body was the image of opulent luxury from head to toe, but rather than drowning in it, her beauty thrived in its presence.

"I-It's a pleasure to meet you! I'm—" I hurriedly bowed my head and tried to introduce myself, but Tamamo-no-Mae cut me off.

“Raise your head, girl. No need for formalities. Noname has told me everything.” She hid her mouth with her cypress fan and waved her nine tails about. “You want my help, correct? I certainly could offer it to you.”

“Oh!” I gasped. “Are you sure, ma’am?”

“Have I any reason to lie? I have the time to spare, anyway. I have been craving something interesting to do recently.” She grinned back at us, and the three of us quickly exchanged a few triumphant glances.

However, her next words made our faces fall.

“This place is so utterly boring,” she sighed. “I do miss when I could run rampant in the human world. The violent urge does rise within me on occasion.”

She traced an unhappy finger along the tatami and spilled more of her disturbing thoughts. “Oh, I miss hearing the agonies of mortal death and the foul stench of burning flesh...and, of course, the wails of people pleading for their lives too. If only there were more trouble in society. Then, I could take a few people, and no one would miss them. However, nowadays...the moment one person goes missing, an uproar ensues. What a boring world this has become.”

She sighed as a lovesick maiden would, but with none of the sweetness and enough poison to kill a man. “I have been getting quite frustrated in here, you see. I considered wreaking havoc in the human world, but Nurarihyon would be very angry with me if I made too much of a mess. So, you have come at a good time. As long as I am fulfilling your request for help, I can have as much fun as I want!”

*She’s so scary!!!*

I let out a small squeak of horror and clutched Konoha’s arm. When I looked over at her, I saw that she and Tsukiko were also clinging to each other. Even Konoha, who was a fox herself, seemed terrified of the vicious Tamamo-no-Mae. She was shaking as she tried to force a smile.

“O-oh, well, I am glad to hear that this will be a good opportunity for you to kill some time.”

“Ho ho!” the nine-tailed fox chuckled. “Yes, yes. However, speaking of killing time...”

She lurched forward from her seat, and a strong perfume tickled my nose, most likely from the incense she had scented her garb with. My reflexes kicked in and I braced myself, but Tamamo-no-Mae only grinned widely across her rosy cheeks.

“I am extremely interested in tales of interspecies marriages, so please, do tell!”

“Interspecies marriages...?” Konoha gulped.

Relationships between humans and non-humans have always been present throughout history all over the world. The Crane Wife from *Tsuru no Ongaeshi* and the stories of the Yuki-onna spirit are probably some of the best-known examples.

“I once fell in love with a human myself, so I also have my own experiences with interspecies romance. Nona tells me that you have embarked on the same path, little fox girl,” Tamamo-no-Mae said, sliding Konoha a sensual glance. The young fox grew red, but for other reasons.

Tamamo-no-Mae giggled at the sight of Konoha’s shyness. “So, tell me the story of your love,” she cooed, her voice like sweet syrup. “Then, after that, answer my question and help me solve a years-old mystery.”

“A mystery?” Konoha said.

“All part of my time-killing,” the other fox shrugged. “There is no need to pay it too much mind.”

“Y-yes, ma’am!” Konoha nodded vigorously, and Tamamo-no-Mae seemed content.

*Actually, I realized, this might be the first time Konoha’s ever said anything about her boyfriend.* Putting my own aspirations aside, I found other people’s love lives to be very interesting.

Konoha still seemed a little nervous, but she began to tell her story, nonetheless.

And it all began with a book that she had borrowed from Tsukiko...

“It was the world inside the book that I fell in love with first,” Konoha began.

She told us how she lived in an old hut deep in the mountains and grew bored of her monotonous life. Tsukiko had lent her an ordinary book about an ordinary high-school romance. It detailed the days at school, the small interactions between the main character and their crush, and the group of friends hanging out in town together, all woven together to spell the tale of a heart tossed about by the waves of a love that was gentle at some times and fierce at others.

“The scene that especially stuck with me was one where the main character went on a date in a town called Shibuya, under a sprawling summer sky that was filled with an enormous cumulonimbus cloud. I kept playing it over and over in my head and fantasized about going to Shibuya every day.”

Then, one summer, as she gazed at the cumulonimbus in the sky, Konoha decided to visit the human world herself. With Tsukiko’s help, she plotted her route there and transformed herself into a human with a leaf. She rode the strange steel box people called a train and arrived in Tokyo after a long journey. The sun was out in full force, and the city felt terribly hot, especially compared to the cool of the mountains. Although Konoha had finally arrived at the town of her dreams, her strength was drained as if a plug had been pulled. Worse, she didn’t even know that she should look for a place with air conditioning to escape the heat. All she could do was sit before the Hachiko statue and try not to collapse.

It was then that a voice called out to her.

“Are you all right?” it asked.

“...And that was when I met Yoruhito-san,” Konoha said.

Tamamo-no-Mae and I exchanged glances. We let out a sigh at the same time, and even whispered in unison: “That’s so cliché...”

Konoha’s story sounded like it had been pulled straight out of a shojo manga. Part of me wanted to cringe, but another part was actually a little jealous.

Moreover, this Yoruhito person who appeared before her just happened to be her type. His hair was the color of honey and glowed in the sunlight. He had pale eyes, thin lips, and a flawless nose. His skin was similarly pale, and he had an air of femininity about him. He stood a head taller than her, and his well-built physique suggested that he was the sporty type and screamed strong and powerful.

He was the spitting image of the character Konoha loved in the story that consumed her thoughts. So much so that she almost thought he had jumped right out of the book.

Yoruhito had noticed that Konoha looked ill and offered to take her someplace cooler. He may even have been quite insistent on it, but Konoha went with him regardless.

“Glass half-full, Yoruhito’s your soulmate. Half-empty, he’s just some jerk trying to pick up girls in Shibuya!” Tsukiko said.

“Tsukiko!” Konoha gasped. “You don’t have to say it like *that*!”

“Oho!” Tamamo-no-Mae raised an eyebrow. “So next, this fine young man brings you somewhere else and takes advantage of you.”

“N-no!” Konoha was shocked. “Yoruhito-san did no such thing! I swear it!”

Once Yoruhito saw that Konoha was feeling much better, he left without so much as asking for her number, and thus the seed for Konoha’s love had been sown.

“I yearned to see him again, so I saved up more money to go to Shibuya once more. There was no guarantee that we would even cross paths again, but the guiding hands of fate brought us together. I was so happy.”

Soon, the two had fallen very much in love with each other and began an official relationship.

“I feel nothing but bliss when I’m with him. When he’s around, I’m so calm and at peace, and I just want to stay with him forever. Before long, I started to fantasize about spending my future with him...”

However, Hakuzosu soon found out about this relationship, and about how



Konoha had begun to take interest in the human world because of the book she read. The rest of the story led into the fuss that landed us here in the first place.

“I want to spend the rest of my days with him. That is why I have come here to ask for your help.” Konoha’s expression darkened. Her linked hands trembled as if she were frightened.

Tamamo-no-Mae closed her fan with a great flourish. “I understand now! Thank you for regaling us with your tale. Now, I will ask you...” She smiled smugly, her dark eyes twinkling with a bewitching charm. “What will you do once this man throws you aside?”

Konoha stiffened at the unexpected question, and her jaw dropped open. “What?”

“My, my, my, did you not hear me?” Tamamo-no-Mae said. “Answer my question, fox child. Will you choose to give him a gruesome and gory death? Will you feast on his innards? Or I suppose you could curse his future generations too, come to think of it. Tell me what will come after your interspecies love *fails!*”

“Wait, wait, please!” I slid in. Konoha was too shocked to speak, so I had to stand up for her here. “What do you mean with that question? How can you say so confidently that he will abandon Konoha?!”

“E-exactly!” Konoha interjected. It looked like she had broken free from the nasty surprise. “I have already revealed to him that I’m a fox. He was surprised at first, but he accepted it wholeheartedly. So, if I could just convince my father...”

“Did you really think you could stay with your human forever?” Tamamo-no-Mae hid her mouth behind her fan once again and smiled as if she enjoyed watching Konoha writhe uncomfortably.

“From what I gather, the non-human creatures in all the tales of interspecies love in this country have all met unfortunate ends. Think of the Crane Wife, the Yuki-onnas, the Tennin Wife, the Monkey Son-in-Law, and the Frog Wife.”

“But... But those are all made-up folktales. They’re not real,” Konoha protested.

“Are you certain about that?” Tamamo-no-Mae asked, tilting her head. She watched as Konoha turned pale and continued.

“Folktales from any country are filled with non-human species. However, in stories like *The Frog Prince* and *Beauty and the Beast*, where the other creatures are actually humans transformed by magic, couldn’t you say that they *had* to have started out as humans because a true interspecies relationship would have been unacceptable, even in fiction? It may have some relation to religion too. Following that logic, you could say that the Japanese should be more accepting of interspecies relationships because of the abundance of such stories in Japan. Isn’t that right, Kaori?”

“You make a good... Wait, no!” I spluttered. “I mean, the points you raise are very intriguing, and I believe it is worth comparing the stories from different countries, but that has nothing to do with the matter at hand!”

*Gah! This is not the time or place to think what she said was interesting!*

However, the nine-tailed fox only lightly giggled at my rebuttal.

“I do love your honesty. Well, leaving that aside, you cannot deny that by reading the stories of interspecies love from Japan, you will come to understand what the people of this nation truly believe.

“The Crane Wife leaves because her husband discovers her true self. Yuki-onnas are written to have killed their husbands once he reveals her identity to another. The Tennin Wife leaves the moment she recovers her stolen celestial garb. The Monkey Son-in-Law ends up in a trap and falls to the bottom of a ravine, dying. And the Frog Wife is chased out of her home with her children.

“While interspecies love is a common and familiar trope of Japanese tales, it never receives a truly *happy* ending. I suppose you could say the Japanese have a liking for stories that end in farewells. They have drawn a clear line between humans and non-humans, and you could even conclude that there is a general abhorrence for interspecies love! How could you possibly prove that the man you love holds none of these prejudices?”

Tamamo-no-Mae’s nasty smile only grew wider as she spoke; Konoha got paler and paler.

“Throughout my long, long life, there has been one question on my mind,” Tamamo-no-Mae said. “Why do the creatures who were chased out of their relationships not enact revenge on humans? Why do they hesitate to kill like the Yuki-onnas have done? There is no need for them to put their head down and quietly leave. It would be so much more cathartic for their love if they destroyed their partner completely, soul and all.”

Konoha gulped in horror.

“So, what will you do, Konoha?” the nine-tailed fox asked. “Tell me what will come after *your* tale of interspecies love!”

“Please, stop!” Konoha could take this no longer and shot to her feet. Her face had been completely drained of its color at this point, but she paid no mind to it and glared fiercely at the other fox.

“Yoruhito-san would never chase me away!” she raged. “I won’t let you look down on him like this!”

“Ha! You can’t possibly know that. Only he knows if he would chase you away or not,” Tamamo-no-Mae replied. “Have you ever considered how difficult it is for two different species to pair? Have you thought about how different the places you live, your common sense, and even your life spans are? If you take him to the spirit world, are you prepared to let him be constantly followed by glimmerflies and targeted by numerous spirits?”

“I...” Konoha’s words caught in her throat, and her lips trembled as she tried to hold her tears back. She stormed out of the room, unable to string together a coherent reply.

“Konoha!” Tsukiko called and scrambled after her. I stayed where I was and glared at Tamamo-no-Mae.

“You agreed to help us,” I fumed. “Why did you have to bully her like that?”

Tamamo-no-Mae said nothing, however. Her ears were twitching about, like she was intently listening for something. In the end, she slumped her shoulders and shut her fan with irritation.

“Hmm, no good. I cannot hear any bells ringing.”

“What?” I blurted out. Then, someone came into sight from within the room. It was Noname.

“You’re brutal as always,” she commented.

“I was only trying to be nice to her,” Tamamo-no-Mae shrugged. “I didn’t think she would take it *that* badly.”

The two met each other’s glance and giggled.

“Wait, what? What’s going on? Noname, you knew that whole exchange would go down like that...?” I stared, unable to make heads or tails of what was happening. Noname noticed my confusion and frowned, trying to find words to dispel the awkwardness.

“I do feel sorry for her, but it really seemed to me that she hadn’t given her relationship enough thought, so I asked Tamamo-no-Mae to play the villain.”

The fox chimed in, giddy with excitement. “Oho ho! I just did what I would have done anyway. I figured that if I really pushed that girl, then things would get interesting. And that perhaps...the mermaid butcher might even show up.” Tamamo-no-Mae clicked her tongue. “However, it seems that it wasn’t enough to make them appear. And after all the time I spent listening to her boring love-at-first-sight story! I can take disappointment, but this is just too much.”

“B-boring...?”

“I really wanted to use this opportunity to take this nation for myself once and for all...”

*She really was as dastardly as the rumors say. This was the one pair of hands that mermaid meat should never fall into!*

I sighed and looked to the direction that Konoha had fled. I personally thought her story was lovely. However, only she would know whether the prospect of making this love an eternal one was worth summoning the mermaid butcher.

All I could do was pray that she would be able to make the decision for her future with a calm mind.

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Meanwhile...

Kinme, Ginme, Kuro, and I had finally arrived at the Sessho-seki grounds, but a thick, white fog enveloped us and we were unable to enter the estate of Tamamo-no-Mae.

“Hey, Suimei! Guess we’re not welcome, huh? Maybe you shouldn’t have brought Kuro. Foxes don’t like dogs, do they? Of course she wouldn’t let a natural enemy into her house,” Kinme said.

Kuro whimpered. “But I didn’t get to do much at Sado. I really wanted to come so I could help out!”

“Kinme, don’t go blaming Kuro when we don’t know anything,” I chastised. “You’re going to make him cry.”

“You’re just a big softie for Kuro, aren’t you?”

As the four of us chattered, we continued to head for the heart of the fog. The smell of sulfur had long disappeared, and we occasionally ran into traditional Japanese-styled buildings, so we knew we were in Tamamo-no-Mae’s territory.

“Kuro, can you follow Kaori’s scent?” I asked.

“Hmm... All I’m smelling now is incense, but I’ll give it my best shot,” the Inugami replied. He wagged his tail with renewed vigor and sniffed the air intently.

*Jeez, how long is it going to take us to reach Kaori’s group?*

I’d written her a letter to tell her we were successful with Dansaburo-danuki, but I had yet to receive a reply. I knew that we had no choice but to communicate through letters, but waiting for one back was a true test of patience.

“...We should get phones,” I muttered.

“Ooh, really? You gonna build cell towers in the spirit world, Suimei?”

“Ugh,” I gritted my teeth at how silly I was being. Then, two figures appeared

in the fog.

“Oh! Kaori—” I stopped. “Wait, that’s not her. But I do see two girls.”

“You’re right. I wonder what they’re doing here?”

They seemed to be deep in conversation, and they hadn’t noticed us yet.

“Don’t cry. It’s all right,” one of them said.

“But... But...”

It sounded like one of them was crying and the other was trying to console her. It felt awkward eavesdropping on two strangers, so we tried to hurry away.

“I suppose Kaori-chan is disappointed in me too. What if she hates me now?”

I skidded to a halt once I heard that all-too-familiar name. My brows furrowed, and the Tengu twins watched me with great interest.

So they wanted to eavesdrop, huh? The thought of it made my skin crawl, but I was curious too. I tried to make myself unobtrusive and blend into the fog.

“Konoha, you’re being silly. Kaori would never hate you for that.”

“But...Tsukiko...”

So these two were Konoha and Tsukiko. It made sense to me now why they were talking about Kaori; she had mentioned them in her letters before. That meant one of them was the daughter of the fox who had started all this mess. Now that I thought about it, I seemed to recall seeing both of them back when Hakuzosu and Shinonome were having their face-off in front of the bookstore too.

“You heard everything Tamamo-no-Mae said as well, so you must know how foolish I was going into this. How could I have never thought about what might come after our relationship? I was stupid to only focus on the present,” Konoha lamented.

“Everyone does that when they’re in love,” Tsukiko said.

“But I chose a *human*!” Konoha cried. “It’s especially necessary for me to think about what comes next. Otherwise, I could end up hurting Yoruhiro-san too! Oh, what do I do?! I should have thought about all this much earlier!” She

buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Tsukiko gently wrapped her arms around Konoha and simply held her, staring wordlessly into the space before her.

This girl clearly cared a great deal about her friend. She knew that forcing words of consolation onto the agitated Konoha would only make things worse, so instead, Tsukiko decided to just let her friend cry it out. Even a complete stranger like me could tell that there was nothing but love in that silent hug.

As I watched the two friends, I saw that Konoha was slowly beginning to calm down. Tsukiko lifted her up and offered her a lace handkerchief. Then, she smiled sweetly and said, "I know what you should do. You should just give up. That would be the best choice."

*What?*

I couldn't stop the strong emotions from rising within me when I heard Tsukiko make that suggestion with such certainty. Her words carried enough strength to make anyone say nod and say yes, all the more so if they were in a weakened mental state.

"You could always find another love. There's no need for you to deal with this pain. You're a real catch, so I'm sure you'll find someone else quickly enough. I'll help you out too—just let me handle it!" Tsukiko cooed.

"But... But..." Konoha tried to protest, her eyes shimmering with tears. Tsukiko gripped her hands and continued with a cheery tone.

"Hey, do you remember when we met?" Tsukiko asked.

"Huh? Yes, of course I do. It's been a long time since then, hasn't it?"

"Longer than the time we've spent with our own families, probably. You're my most precious childhood friend. I've never let you down, have I? So don't worry."

Tsukiko caressed Konoha's pale and slender hands in hers, stroking them over and over again. She watched her fox friend with fervent eyes, leaned in closer until their cheeks almost brushed against each other, and whispered into Konoha's ear: "So you can just give up and leave everything to me."

“...Okay,” Konoha nodded with unfocused eyes.

Something was clearly not right with her. It was like her mind had completely switched off.

*Wait. She's under a tanuki spell!*

I burst out from the fog once the realization hit me.

“Don’t let her choose for you! Whether you give up or not is a decision you have to make yourself!” I shouted and grabbed Tsukiko’s arm. She winced in pain and released Konoha.

“Wh-what have I been...?” Konoha gasped. It seemed like the spell had been broken. Now that she was lucid, her eyes widened in shock.

She had no defenses whatsoever. It honestly made me angry to see her so careless. She had dragged Kaori and the bookstore into her mess, and yet she didn’t even have the guts to protect herself properly.

I shot Konoha a cold glare. “It’s all well and good to grow enough self-awareness to realize how foolish you’ve been, and I don’t blame you for being so anxious over this, but you should be more considerate of the people around you who have been doing their best to help you out. If you want to throw in the towel so easily, then be prepared to lose more than love.”

Konoha gulped.

“Living life and building love are not things you can do alone,” I continued. “You honestly shouldn’t even pursue love if you’re going to let these hurdles stop you before anything’s even happened.”

Konoha seemed to take my words to heart, and she turned a deep red from embarrassment.

“Get *off* me!” Tsukiko shouted, shaking her arm free with a vicious swing. She swept back to Konoha’s side and scowled at me with piercing eyes.

“What gives you any right to stick your nose in our business?” she growled. “Let’s go, Konoha. We can discuss what to do next somewhere else.”

And just like that, the two faded into the fog.



“What the hell...?” I muttered. As their shadowy forms disappeared, I let out a heavy sigh. A sense of dread came over me, knowing that these girls were meant to be supporting Kaori. I didn’t feel very good about people who couldn’t do any sort of self-reflection without being told the harsh truth up front.

I glanced up and saw that the pair had dropped something.

It was a book. I picked it up and saw a stamp from Shinonome’s bookstore inside.

“*Niimi Nankichi’s Stories for Children...?*” I raised an eyebrow and began flipping through it at random. The pages had been dirtied by all its previous readers, and they were warped from age.

Suddenly, something barreled into my shoulders with a heavy thump. I grimaced and looked up to see the twins smiling cheerfully back at me.

“That was some speech, Suimei! Love has turned you into quite the orator!” Kinme said.

“Man, I wish I could say something that cool one day. Oh, the pains of losing on the battlefield of love!” Ginme sighed.

“Ugh, shut up,” I grumbled. I could feel my face turning hot. “Seriously. Shut. Up.”

I shook the laughing twins off and sucked in a deep breath. They could be. So. Annoying.

I idly looked up at the sky and saw the pale moon floating above us through a gap in the fog. It was quickly shrouded again, however, and in a blink, it was gone. I stuck my hand into my pocket and felt Kaori’s letter against my fingertips. I wondered if I should send her another one as soon as possible. I was concerned about Konoha and Tsukiko too.

“I just hope you haven’t gotten yourself involved in something weird again, Kaori...” I muttered. There was no one to receive my words, however—only the fog to swallow them up into the unknown.

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My eyes snapped open with a start. I slid off the railing I had been leaning on

and spun around, surveying my surroundings. I could swear that I'd heard a familiar voice, but I couldn't see anyone I recognized anywhere. Disappointed, I slumped my shoulders.

I thought I had heard Suimei's voice.

I cast my eyes up and looked at the moon floating serenely in the twilight and the birds flying across it. A twinge of loneliness played at my heart as I gazed into the fading sky.

"Where did Konoha and Tsukiko go?" I wondered out loud. I'd been waiting for them outside the mansion for a quite a while now, but I could see no sign of them returning. I returned inside, despondent, and saw Tamamo-no-Mae enjoying a cup of tea, poised and elegant as always, with a satisfied smile adorning her face.

"Was there some good news or something?" I asked.

"No, no," she replied. "Just that... Oh ho ho." She tipped her fan over her mouth and gave me a knowing gaze.

"I sent a few of my servants to keep watch on a few boorish men who have entered the grounds without the slightest notice. I have a feeling that I will have fun with this."

"Men...?" I tilted my head in confusion, but just a moment later, I realized who she was talking about and my face lit up.

"Wait, do you mean Suimei's team? Are they here already?"

"Oh ho ho. Yes, precisely. I do not intend to let them anywhere near us, though," Tamamo-no-Mae said.

"What? Why not?"

"Why must I invite them in when they have failed to send me any notice? I may have considered admitting them if they had bothered to write me a sweet love song or some such thing," she shrugged. "That is the bare minimum for a man to do when he wishes to visit a lady."

*Urk.* I winced at her last-century ideals. Noname, who was snacking on a fried Chinese pastry called *karakudamono*, raised an eyebrow.

“You’re just doing that to bully them,” she said. “You didn’t ask Tamaki to do all that when you invited him.”

“Because I like him,” Tamamo-no-Mae shrugged. “He is leagues above these imbeciles. Well, I am not too upset that he could not make it. I will see him sooner or later. Anyway, never mind that. I must say, this young man is quite fine. If Kaori ever grows tired of him, I may take him for myself. He looks like he could do with a little...discipline.”

“What? Discipline?!” I floundered. “No!”

What was it about Suimei that attracted these dangerous types like Tamamo-no-Mae and the Mountain God?! I opened my mouth again in protest as the heat rose in my face, but the nine-tailed fox just snickered and cast a glance at the door.

“Well, let’s leave that for now. It seems our princess has finally returned.”

“Huh?” I hurriedly followed her gaze and saw Konoha standing in the doorway...without Tsukiko, strangely enough. She looked drastically different from when she had burst out of the room too. Her eyes and nose were red, like she had only just stopped crying, and her makeup and mascara were running all over her face.

“What happened? You look *dreadful*!” I gasped.

“I got into an argument with Tsukiko,” Konoha whispered.

I was shocked. They seemed like best friends! I could only return silent blinks in my surprise as Konoha turned to Tamamo-no-Mae and bowed.

“I must thank you for your earlier guidance. I now realize how utterly naive I have been,” she said.

“Oh?” Tamamo-no-Mae’s ears perked up. “Then, do tell me what you plan to do now. All I want to know is what will follow your relationship. Will you continue on with it knowing that one day you may be thrown aside? Or will you give up on this Yoruhiro man?”

“I will not!” Konoha pushed back firmly, determination flashing in her eyes. “No matter what hardships cross my path, I would never give up on my life with

Yoruhito-san! Tsukiko said I should leave him to avoid being hurt, but...I'm prepared for this. I can't let fear stop me from doing what I want with my life. All scars heal with time, but if I let this love go, I will never find one like it again."

She rested a hand on her heart and looked directly at Tamamo-no-Mae. "It doesn't matter if our story ends in tragedy like the folktales of old. I'll cry all of my sadness out, and then, after that, I'll find someone who will make me truly happy and show you that we can make this work! *That's* how my interspecies love will continue!"

Konoha's cheeks had taken on the color of fresh roses, and her eyes shone like jewels. Her hopes for the future were clear as crystal, and there was no hesitation in her heartfelt declaration. No matter what obstacles came her way, Konoha was sure to do anything she could to overcome them.

"Oh ho ho ho! So *that* is what you have decided for yourself, is it? I see, I see!" Tamamo-no-Mae laughed and nodded, satisfied. "That is most interesting. Very well, I shall help you with your father, then."

"Thank you so much!" Konoha smiled.

She seemed like a new person now. Before, she had simply assumed that her relationship would be smooth sailing if only Hakuzosu would agree, but now that Tamamo-no-Mae had pinpointed her lack of consideration, her naivety had been stripped clean away. This new Konoha would never fall victim to the temptations of mermaid meat. She had steered herself away from the possibility of becoming immortal and suffering endlessly in eternity.

I let out a sigh of relief and snuck a glance at Noname, but she wasn't looking at Konoha. Instead, her amber eyes stared outside the room with a darkened expression. It was strange to see her looking so solemn. Tamamo-no-Mae crept beside Noname and whispered to her from behind her fan.

"Oh ho! That fox girl really is a bore. The tanuki girl, on the other hand... I find her to be most intriguing. She may be exactly what Tamaki needs. What do you think, Noname?"

Noname's face looked as if a storm cloud had passed over it, and she turned away from the nine-tailed fox, unwilling to face what was being implied.

I frowned, trying to understand what they were talking about. Was I on the wrong page, somehow? A strong sense that something was deeply amiss gnawed away at me, and I patted my pocket.

*Tinkle.*

The bell in my pocket sounded, and I slipped my hand inside. Sure enough, the bell Konoha had given me sat safely within.

“The bell for the mermaid butcher,” I muttered. As I did, I felt a stare directed right at me, and I looked toward the entrance.

It was Tsukiko. However, there was something off about her. The longer I focused on her, the stranger she seemed. According to Konoha, the two had gotten into an argument, but while Konoha had returned with her makeup in a complete mess, Tsukiko looked as though she had applied a fresh layer of it.

The tanuki stared at her friend and narrowed her chestnut eyes. She muttered, “You really are so hopeless without my help.”

“Tsukiko?”

“Ma’am! Terrible news!” came a cry. It was the boy who had guided us into the mansion. He bowed so deep his head almost hit the floor and shouted with ragged breath, “Th-the Sojobo has sent us a message saying that talks between Shinonome and Hakuzosu have fallen apart! Hakuzosu is gathering his foxes to ask Shibaemon for reinforcements and to silence Shinonome once and for all!”

Noname and I exchanged worried glances, and I whirled around to see how Tamamo-no-Mae was reacting. I could not see her mouth behind her fan, but her eyes narrowed in a way that suggested she found this news to be delightful. She approached the boy without making a single sound and lifted his chin with her fan.

“And what did Shibaemon-tanuki say to that?” she asked.

“He, um, he said that he would strike down Hakuzosu if he set foot on Awaji Island.”

“Good! I commend him!” Tamamo-no-Mae said. She rose to her feet and continued with great energy. “I have not felt such excitement in a very long

time!” she giggled. “Prepare yourselves, for we are heading to Awaji Island!” She hurried off and disappeared into the depths of the room, leaving the rest of us in shock.

I curiously shifted my eyes to Tsukiko. She stood still as a doll and smiled serenely, her gaze never wavering from Konoha.

## Chapter 4:

### Washing Away the Secrets at Eshima

THE TREES ON Mount Kurama chattered as the wind swept through the forests blanketing the slopes. Shinonome sat limp on the steps of the mossy hut, and approaching him was a man wearing a flashy haori that clashed with the surrounding greenery.

It was Tamaki.

“Tamaki, my old friend. Must’ve been a long trek this deep into the mountains, huh?” Shinonome greeted him.

“And I see you haven’t had much luck either, Shinonome, my good friend,” Tamaki returned. He sank into the spot beside Shinonome with a soft thud and offered him a bottle of alcohol with a weary hand. The spirit declined, however, and stuck his lips out with a sulky expression.

“That stupid Hakuzosu won’t listen to anything I have to say,” he pouted. “He rode straight out of here on his high horse swearing that he would ruin my bookstore. Jeez, I can’t stand narrow-minded folks like him. I wish I could get back the hours I spent arguing with that numbskull!”

“Hm, he’s not the only one who gets stubborn over their daughter,” Tamaki said and glanced at Shinonome.

“Oh, shut it. He’s way more hardheaded than I am.”

“Sure, sure.”

The two men shared a chuckle, then fell silent.

“So, how’s your plan looking? Think it’ll work?” Shinonome asked.

Tamaki raised a surprised eyebrow, and then he allowed himself a small grin. “When did you realize?”

“From the beginning, when Hakuzosu stormed the bookstore while we were together,” Shinonome said. “Felt like something was very wrong when you

started acting all concerned for me without a hint of irony.”

“So you knew everything and baited Hakuzosu into stalling here?”

“Not really... To be honest, he really pissed me off with the way that he mixed fiction and reality together, so I wanted to knock some sense into him myself.”

“You really are Kaori’s dad,” Tamaki chuckled. “She said something very similar too.”

“Ha!” Shinonome laughed. “Well, yeah. I did raise her, after all. The apple usually doesn’t fall very far from the tree.” He flashed a toothy grin and glanced at Tamaki. “Parents will stop at nothing to protect their kid. I guess that’s one thing Hakuzosu and I have in common. Ain’t that right, Tamaki?”

His friend said nothing.

“But, man, foxes and tanuki sure do like to cause trouble,” Shinonome sighed. “How dare they rope us into their mess! After this whole debacle is over, I’m going to make them compensate me for my loss of business.”

“Oh, they will,” Tamaki muttered.

His companion lightly scratched his head. “Anyway, make sure you don’t get Kaori or my bookstore into any more trouble. Who knows when our luck will run out?”

“...I know,” Tamaki said. Now it was his turn to glance at Shinonome. “How are you feeling?”

“Same old,” Shinonome shrugged.

“I see.” His line of questioning proceeded no further, and he stood up.

“Hey, take your booze with you,” his friend said.

“It’s dead weight to me. Just give it to the Sojobo or something.”

“Hey, now...”

The story-seller left behind the perplexed spirit, and, as Shinonome watched his friend amble out of the grounds, he shouted, “You think your eternity’s finally going to end soon?”

Tamaki turned back and looked at his companion of many decades.



“I’ll make sure it does,” he said.

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The winds this evening were calm as a gentle sigh. The sun had just hidden itself below the horizon, and the darkened sea clamored as it pushed against the shore. The air was colder against the skin than it had been during the day, and the harbor was long deserted. I cast my eyes over the landscape as I stood on the wharf and held out my hands to release a paper crane, watching it as it took off into the veiled sky.

Suimei was somewhere here on Awaji Island as well, so the crane should reach him soon enough. My party had made our way here today, the day after we secured Tamamo-no-Mae’s promise to help. We had traveled through hell to get from Tochigi Prefecture to Hyogo Prefecture. It certainly helped cut down precious time while we were on such a tight schedule.

There was no time to complain, however. We were on Awaji Island to see Tsukiko’s father, Shibaemon-tanuki, because his long-time friend Hakuzosu had asked him for reinforcements. Having been confined to Mount Kurama, the fox apparently did not realize that the tanuki he had asked for help was on his daughter’s side rather than his own. This meant that before he began his assault on the bookstore, he would be coming here to Awaji Island. Shibaemon-tanuki seemed to be aware of this too and had decided to settle the score on his home turf.

We left for Tochigi as soon as we heard the news. When we arrived early in the morning, we immediately regrouped for a strategy meeting that had been running up until now. Tamamo-no-Mae had some...extreme methods in mind, and “tough” would not even begin to describe the experience of dialing them back. After much deliberation, we managed to come up with a plan that we could all agree on.

Now all that was left was to execute it.

We were prepared to pull out all the stops to subdue Hakuzosu and prevent him from destroying the bookstore and breaking up his daughter’s relationship. We had to take a stand against this act of injustice!

It was easier said than done, though.

I was glad that we were able to come up with a plan of action, but there was one more thing that I was worried about. I clutched Suimei's letter to my heart, the one that I had just replied to with my own crane. The one that he had written when he was near Tamamo-no-Mae's estate. We were unable to meet each other in the end, unfortunately, but he must have sensed that we were going to miss each other and decided to write about what he saw that day. And, because we were so close, his letter reached me much quicker than usual. In it, he talked about what he had seen in great detail, especially the exchange he overheard between Konoha and Tsukiko. There were many points of concern for me there.

"Niimi Nankichi..." I whispered to myself. As I recalled the author's name from the letter, apprehension began to stir in my chest.

Our store occasionally sold books that were old and didn't get rented very much anymore. Tsukiko had previously purchased the collection of Niimi Nankichi's tales through this system, perhaps because it held some sort of sentimental value for her. Niimi's stories are so well known that everyone in Japan would have at least heard of one or two of them, but even knowing all this, I still couldn't see the bigger picture.

According to Suimei, Tsukiko had tried to put Konoha under a spell to make her give up on her boyfriend. However, if Konoha had actually surrendered at that time, then surely she would have come out from it worse off.

Why would Tsukiko do this to her best friend?

What Suimei said confirmed my other suspicions, though.

"Tsukiko must be the one who's been in contact with the mermaid butcher..." I muttered. I closed my eyes, trying to give myself the strength to handle this revelation.

*What do you think all this means, Suimei?* I thought. But of course, he wasn't here to reply. He was doing what he needed to do with Tamaki-san. I couldn't even so much as glance at his face. God must have been feeling extra unkind then, giving us no chance to see each other.

Somebody tapped on my shoulder, and I almost launched myself out of my skin.

“Eek!!!” I shrieked and turned. “Oh, hey, Noname.”

“What are you doing, staring into the ocean? It’s so dark out here. I thought maybe something bad happened,” she said.

“Ah ha ha. Don’t worry about me. I’m just thinking, I promise,” I reassured Noname.

“Hey, you know, you don’t have to force yourself to laugh,” she said. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

My body stiffened at her direct perceptiveness, and I grinned bitterly in defeat; There was just no hiding anything from Noname.

“You see through everything, huh? Sorry I made you worry.”

“Talk to me,” she said. “I promise I won’t judge.”

I nodded, thinking of how to form my thoughts into words. She really was so kind, and she always made me feel safe.

“So, um...” I began. “Tsukiko’s the one who’s seen the mermaid butcher, right?”

I prayed for Noname to say no, but her brows creased and she nodded.

“Wait, so did you think it was Konoha?” she asked. “Sorry, I probably should have been clearer about that.”

“No, you’re good,” I said. “I shouldn’t have just assumed it was her, either. Well, I mean, on the surface, she does seem like the one who’s plagued by trouble, though.”

I turned back to the calm harbor and spotted Konoha a distance away, watching the waters by herself and looking despondent. She must have been feeling anxious over having to confront her father soon, but it probably wasn’t the only thing that was weighing on her. She and Tsukiko were still not talking to each other, and the emotional strain of not having her trusty friend by her side was probably taking quite a toll.

*Could this be part of Tsukiko’s plan too...?*

As that unnerving thought flashed across my mind, I asked Noname, “Hey,

what do you think Tsukiko would gain from pushing Konoha like this? I always thought she wanted the best for her friend, but then she went and did that thing... Why would she do it?"

"Must have something to do with that bastard mermaid butcher," came an aloof voice—it was Shibaemon-tanuki. "Guess the cat's out of the bag. I gotta apologize for using you ladies to keep an eye on my daughter. Sorry about that."

"What do you mean?" I asked, perplexed.

"Both Tamaki and I had a hand in this," he said.

"Tamaki-san too?"

Shibaemon-tanuki rubbed his stubble, his face stern. "A few months ago, I noticed that Tsukiko was acting a little oddly. She started buying a lot of bells and kept traveling back and forth between the spirit and human worlds. As I was wondering what she was up to, that story-seller came and told me he could smell the mermaid butcher on my daughter."

He explained how he told Tamaki-san to go away because, well, any parent would find some man talking about how their young daughter smelled to be both disgusting and suspicious.

"He kept coming back, though," the tanuki continued. "So I thought I might as well do a little snooping. I did indeed learn that my daughter had met someone who very possibly could have been the mermaid butcher. And it shocked me, you know? I didn't want Tsukiko touching something as dubious as mermaid meat."

However, by the time Shibaemon-tanuki had uncovered this much, the gears of Tsukiko's plans were apparently already turning.

"And she's at that age where it's hard to just ask her what's going on, you know? Then I heard about Hakuzosu's attack on the bookstore and realized that she had also planned that."

"She what?" I gasped. "Why do you think that?"

"Young lady, try and remember why this entire thing happened in the first

place,” Shibaemon-tanuki said. “It was because Konoha became interested in the human world, correct? And while the book that piqued her interest was from your bookstore, who was the one that lent it to her in the first place?”

“It was...Tsukiko, I think,” I answered. When Konoha was telling us about how she met her boyfriend, she mentioned that too.

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Wait a minute! You mean to say that Tsukiko tried to make Konoha want to go to the human world on purpose? But why?”

“That’s what I want to know,” Shibaemon-tanuki huffed. “All I could do was bolt straight to the bookstore. Tamaki then pulled a fast one—horribly, I might add—and got Shinonome to hold Hakuzosu down. While I gathered some allies and tried to find out just what Tsukiko was up to, I had Tamaki keep watch over her. I still have no idea what she wants, though.”

*Me neither*, I thought. I couldn’t figure out why she would light the spark that sent Konoha to the human world, support her relationship, and then try and get in the way of it.

“Well, I guess there are just some mysteries that can’t be unraveled! Wah ha ha ha!” he bellowed.

“Sir, I don’t see what’s so funny about this! What are we meant to do now?” I cried without thinking.

When he heard me, Shibaemon-tanuki’s muscular frame shrunk in on itself. “I apologize. I really am sorry for not keeping my daughter in line, especially now that she’s finally managed to make herself a new friend.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s not the most...ah, *articulate* girl in the world,” he explained. “She needs more time than the average person to do most things, and...she once fell into a very bad place and shut herself off from the rest of the world.”

“I see...”

“As her parent, I just wish that things could have gone better, you know?” Shibaemon-tanuki said. “Thankfully, Konoha came into her life and helped her

open up. They've been great friends ever since, but Tsukiko's never managed to make another friend, so imagine my delight when I learned that she was getting along so well with you!"

Suddenly, I heard Konoha cry out, and I swiftly turned around.

"Tsukiko!" she yelled, and beside her was her friend who had only just arrived.

"Sorry I'm late," the tanuki apologized.

"It's okay. I'm just glad you're here," Konoha said. "I just want to say...sorry about what happened before. I felt so anxious without you, and, well... I really need you with me."

Tsukiko's lips parted for a serene smile. She took the fox's hands in hers and nodded.

"Well, I'm here now, so everything will be okay," she soothed her.

"Yeah!" Konoha nodded back. "It will be now that you're back by my side. If anything comes up, I know you'll help me solve it in a snap. I can always count on you." She seemed honestly glad that Tsukiko was back, and her friend's grin grew wider.

*Everything will be okay, huh...?*

I wasn't so sure, given that Tsukiko was the instigator. As I watched her eyes, I began to feel that there was still something much darker hidden within her. I felt a shiver run through my body.

"Hey, young lady," Shibaemon-tanuki called out to me, his face creased with deep thought. "I know that my daughter's been causing a lot of trouble for you, but, well...life is going to keep marching on after this, and the more people you have to march with you the better, right? I know it's probably rude of me to ask, but do you think you could keep being friends with her?"

He spoke like a desperate man backed into a corner, one who was truly and thoroughly concerned for his daughter.

"My goodness," Noname chuckled. "Don't you think you're being a little overbearing?"

Shibaemon-tanuki averted his gaze, embarrassed. "Get off my back," he grumbled. "I'm worried about things going belly-up too. I'd do anything for my darling girl. That's what us dads are here for."

*I wonder if that's how Shinonome-san feels too...*

Shibaemon-tanuki may have been one of the Three Great Tanuki of Japan, but he was also just a normal dad.

*Oh, now I kind of miss Shinonome-san.* There was only one answer for me to give, then.

"Of course," I gave the tanuki a strong nod. "I'd love to be Tsukiko's friend, if she wants me to be."

He smiled, his eyes creasing softly. "I really 'preciate it. You really are a plucky one, just like Shinonome."

He gave his stomach a hearty slap and shot Noname a glance. "I don't know what Tsukiko's after, but she seems awfully fixated on Konoha, so I have a feeling that if we solve Konoha's problem, we'll get to the bottom of what Tsukiko wants. For now, let's focus on calming Hakuzosu down. At the end of the day, he's just a concerned parent like me."

He spun on his heel and waved a casual hand at me. "I leave this to you, bookstore girl."

"Y-yes, of course!" I swept myself into a bow and Shibaemon-tanuki began to head toward Tamamo-no-Mae, satisfied with how things had gone.

As I watched him leave, I muttered to myself, "Man, I'm so dense. I can't believe I never picked up on how Tsukiko was feeling even after spending so much time with her."

Whatever she had buried inside of her, it was heavy and hopeless enough for her to turn to mermaid meat. She had not consumed any yet, however. Maybe she was trying desperately to find a way to solve things without resorting to the meat. I prayed that was the case.

I had no idea how I could help her, though...

"Hey, Noname? I don't know if I would be able to help everyone get their

happy endings...” I mumbled. I felt way out of my depth in this ocean of quandaries. “Everyone’s special in their own way, but I’m just a regular human with no powers or anything. I don’t feel like I have what it takes to help Hakuzosu, or Konoha...or Tsukiko.”

My uncertainties spilled forth before I could stop myself, but Noname only laughed lightly.

“You’re worried that what you’re capable of isn’t enough? Silly, if you’re willing to work hard, then that’s more than enough.” She joined my arms into a loop. “Let’s say that this represents what you’re able to do. And, let’s see, you’ve saved at least one person. Yes?”

I looked at my arm loop and frowned. I felt guilty looking at how small it was.

“But if we do this...” Noname continued, locking her fingers with mine and expanding the loop. “Then we can help so many more people, right? You don’t have to go at this alone. You’ve got me, and Tamaki, and Shibaemon-tanuki... and, of course, Suimei too. I once lamented that I didn’t have what it took to save anyone, but you’re different. Those who are the most capable are those who have many people to join hands with. Like you.”

I felt my heart tie into a great knot at Noname’s caring words.

“...Can I get a hug?” I asked. She opened her arms without another word, and I flung my arms around her.

“Thanks,” I whispered. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

There really was no one as kind as Noname. She knew when to be firm and always guided me when I needed it most. I had to do everything I could to pay back her kindness!

*I swear I’ll pull through this no matter what,* I thought to myself, trying to nail the encouragement in.

Then, Noname stroked my head with a gentle hand. “Navigating a family sure can be hard, huh? There’s no correct way to have one, and yet so many hurdles just keep coming up. I’m sure Hakuzosu’s also confused about what the right



thing to do is. I really want to do whatever we can for him.”

Then, she snuck a devilish grin at me and winked. “Plus, no one gets in the way of my Kaori and her Suimei and comes away unscathed. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, right?”

“H-hey!” I cried. “What has that got to do with anything?!”

Noname just laughed at how red my face was growing. “I’ve long given up on saving thousands upon thousands, but I can at least help those I can reach,” she said softly. “So, let’s both do our darndest.”

“Of course!” I nodded, letting Noname’s conviction stoke my motivation.

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Hakuzosu, having arrived in Ejima, sat cross-legged atop the peak of its cliff as he waited for Shibaemon-tanuki with the sound of crashing waves as his only company. He was watching the sky, gazing at the full moon drifting in the darkness. Its luminance wavered on the surface of the gloomy waters below, its brightness a bold declaration of its presence.

*Cries of the plovers*

*Fill the beach of Eshima*

*Perhaps in its waves*

*We may see the reflection*

## *Of the serene moon tonight*

Since the days of old, Ejima had held a longstanding reputation as a place of mesmerizing beauty. Hakuzosu wondered if the now-bygone aristocrats had also observed the same moon from the same spot as he knocked back his cup of alcohol, letting the Heian poem drift from his lips between each gulp. He winced as the drink stung the cut on his lip, a remnant of his fight with Shinonome. He touched it gingerly, feeling it swell hot against his fingertip.

“I’m gonna make him regret he ever hit me...” the fox grumbled as he took another swig, blocking out the pain. The cheap drink tasted foul on his tongue, but he drank on anyway. He had to keep at it; otherwise he feared that he would be swallowed by the wretched hate festering inside of him. His resentment for the human race was so vile that even he felt repulsed by it.

It was true that he hated humans with all his heart, but he had no desire to externalize his loathing. He also understood that fighting them would be a losing battle, as they were far greater in number and outclassed the spirits with their technology.

Hakuzosu also knew full well that much of his friend Shinonome’s life had been spent among humans and their culture, dealing in their books and even adopting a human girl. However, he was willing to gloss over it all because he believed Shinonome was a good man and a treasured friend he would hate to lose. He also didn’t believe in speaking ill to his friends. But when he found out that his beloved daughter was in a relationship with a human, it was like the floodgates had suddenly been opened, and the feelings he had spent so long suppressing came gushing forth in a murky, muddy mess.

“The world is so absurd...” he muttered, scorning himself.

He was well aware of his hypocrisy as he sat here resenting humans while wearing human garb, sipping human alcohol, and reciting a human poem. Even the name and the legend of Hakuzosu the fox had been created by humans. His hate was enough to make him nauseated, and yet here he was. There was nothing he could do but laugh at the irony of his existence.

“Really?” came a voice. “I personally think this world is well worth living in.”

Hakzuso recognized it, and he turned around to see Shibaemon-tanuki standing behind him.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” the tanuki said. “I had a tough time gathering all my underlings. It’s a full moon, so they were all too busy slapping away at their stomachs and making merry.”

“Ha ha! Sounds rough,” Hakuzosu laughed. “Tanuki gotta do what tanuki gotta do, I guess.” He stood and held out his hand.

“Thanks for hearing me out. I really appreciate the extra reinforcements,” he said.

Shibaemon-tanuki stared at his hand wordlessly and raised his own slowly, slowly, until he finally gripped it back and shook it.

“I didn’t think you would actually help me, you know,” the fox admitted.

“Why?” Shibaemon-tanuki asked.

“Because your daughter’s so close to Konoha,” Hakuzosu said. “I assumed you would take her side and not mine.”

Shinonome, at his full strength, was a true force to be reckoned with. Anyone going against him would need to amass as large an army as possible. Shibaemon-tanuki, too, was not to be trifled with. The fox knew that there was a high chance he would take Shinonome’s side because of how much his daughter loved the bookstore, and that would certainly mean more than a little trouble. If Hakuzosu were to be honest, he had only called Shibaemon-tanuki out here to ascertain whose side he would take, and he was more than happy to have his worries proven unfounded.

“I owe your daughter one. Plus, I still feel guilty about her scarred ear,” the tanuki said.

He was talking about how Konoha’s ear had a piece missing because of a wound that she had suffered for Tsukiko.

“Oh...” Hakuzosu said. “Well, thanks. Really, I truly appreciate it.” He gave a small bow, and Shibaemon-tanuki flashed a yellowed, toothy grin.

“Don’t mention it,” he said. “Hey, pour me a drink. I could do with one right now. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No, of course not,” Hakuzosu answered. As he shook his head, he noticed that someone was standing behind Shibaemon-tanuki, and he froze.

“Father...”

It was Konoha. She was wearing a white dress, and her skin almost glowed in the moonlight. She stood out like her own celestial body in the dark of the night.

“What are you playing at?” Hakuzosu narrowed his eyes at Shibaemon-tanuki.

“I can’t just hand my precious army over to someone who isn’t thinking clearly,” he said with brutal honesty. “So talk things over with your daughter first. We’ve got plenty of booze to go around. Have you ever had anything from Awaji? They’ve got some seriously strong stuff. Been through a devastating earthquake, after all.”

“I have nothing to say to her,” the fox growled. “That bookstore is going down, and I will not allow any relationships with any humans. The mere thought of it is preposterous.”

“You sure are stubborn. You really don’t mind if your daughter comes away from this hating you?”

“She’ll understand why I’m doing all this one day. Until then, I’ll gladly be the bad guy.”

“You’ve got guts, if nothing else,” Shibaemon-tanuki said. “Truly a model parent. However...” He slugged the drink he was holding straight down his throat and smiled, seemingly pleased at himself. “You really need to pull your head out of your ass. You’ve already caused enough trouble for so many people. Go calm yourself down with a drink.”

Out of nowhere, Hakuzosu felt a fierce impact strike him in the head.

“Grngh!” he groaned. The sound of shattered ceramics rang through the air, and a waterfall of alcohol cascaded all over his head, its acrid smell assaulting his nostrils.



Shibaemon-tanuki had lobbed the entire bottle of drink straight at his face.

The fox felt all his strength leave him, and he collapsed to the ground. Through the haze, he could sense that the tanuki was standing above him and speaking.

“What a shame,” the tanuki said. “That bottle was a bit too nice to waste on a boorish creature like you.”

“You... You tricked me...!” Hakuzosu choked with what little breath he had left in his lungs.

Shibaemon-tanuki scoffed. “Maybe try not being so gullible next time. I *am* a tanuki, you know.”

*Bo-bom.* The last thing Hakuzosu heard was the sound of the traitor drumming his stomach before the world spun into black.

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A soft bubbling filled the room together with the revolting stench that choked the air. It smelled of rotting fish left to further decay in a pot, overwhelming the senses of anyone nearby.

“Tch. No matter how many times I cook this, it never gets any better. The smell alone makes it barely edible!”

The dilapidated shack housed an irori hearth on its floor, and beside it sat an unkempt man, stirring the pot on the fire with a gnarled and knobby hand. His eyes remained fixed on his stew and, sparing not even a single glance, he muttered, “I know, I know, don’t look at me like that. I promise I won’t hunt any more foxes.”

He turned and grinned at me, displaying a set of teeth with several empty spaces. As he did, he darted a look at a corner in the room.

“Nothing I can do about what I’ve already killed, though.”

In the corner sat a pile of fox corpses, stacked high like a mountain. Their plush, golden fur was marred with dirt and blood, most of which had formed a pool beneath the stack.

“Old habits die hard, y’know? I find myself setting traps without even realizing

it.”

But he seemed completely unashamed of his deeds, and he moved his hand over to offer a wooden bowl filled with a putrid liquid.

“Anyway, here. You must be hungry,” he said. The bowl, now filled with the stew the man had been cooking, emanated a foul stench. Whatever it was, it could not have been fit for consumption. I made no move to take the bowl, and the man smiled, the many warts on his face moving as his lips curled.

“What, not gonna eat? It’s not the tastiest thing in the world but at least have some.”

Something about his yellowed, toothy grin made my stomach turn. I wanted more than anything to turn away from its insidious curve.

“Come on. It’s fox stew.”

“AAAHHHHHH!” Hakuzosu woke with a scream. He bolted with a great lurch back into the conscious world, his shoulders heaving with each ragged breath. He swiveled his bloodshot eyes around the room and only calmed down once he realized that he had been dreaming.

“What on earth was that? Why did I have that dream after all this time...?” he gasped, dazed. He wiped the cold sweat from his brow and collected himself to check his surroundings. While he was unconscious, he had been carried into a traditional Japanese-style room about ten square meters large and lay in the center on a futon cloaked by a mosquito net.

“Hey! Shibaemon!” he shouted for the tanuki.

No reply.

He could hear muffled, merry laughter, perhaps from a banquet somewhere nearby, mingled with the *bo-bom* of stomachs being drummed.

“I see you’re finally awake,” came a voice from beyond the net.

Hakuzosu immediately hunched into a defensive stance as the new presence made itself known. An old man with a white beard sat atop a cushion on the floor, surveying the fox from beneath his long, wispy eyebrows.

“I am Tasaburo, one of the Three Great Tanuki of Japan. I am sure you have heard of me.”

“Y-yeah, from Kagawa. You’re the one who was deified at Yashima!”

“Oh?” the tanuki seemed pleased. “I’m glad to hear that even the foxes know of me. I suppose this means my good deeds were worth the effort.”

Hakuzosu, irritated by Tasaburo-tanuki’s good mood, swallowed back the urge to scream and shout at him. He would only be digging himself a deeper hole with any provocations. The tanuki was a deity, so Hakuzosu thought that they could at least talk things out, especially when he knew that he was on the right side of history. The ones in the wrong were Shibaemon-tanuki and Konoha, not him.

“Excuse me,” Hakuzosu began, trying to get a grasp on what had happened, but he was cut short by some visitors.

“Tasaburo-sama? Is my father awake now?”

“We’ve brought some alcohol with us. Oh, and something to eat while you drink as well.”

“Coming in! Here, let me pour your drink for you.”

It was Konoha, Kaori, and Noname. Hakuzosu stared straight at Kaori and growled.

“Shinonome’s... You! Human girl!” He felt the blood rush to his head at the sight of her, and he shouted as he flung aside the futon covers. “You sent Shibaemon-tanuki after me, didn’t you?! You humans always play dirty!”

Kaori’s face fell, and she quietly took a seat beside Tasaburo-tanuki.

“I did not,” she replied.

“Father! Don’t be so rude to Kaori-chan!” Konoha huffed.

“Konoha, be quiet,” Hakuzosu seethed as he turned back to Kaori. “You’ve come to stop me from destroying the bookstore. Isn’t that correct?”

“Yes, you’re not wrong,” she said. “Because it seems my father has failed to stop you.”

Through the net, Hakuzosu thought he saw the human girl shrug. A spike of irritation flashed through him, annoyed at how laid-back she was.

“So you thought that because I’m just some dirty fox, you can solve this all by catching me, is that it?”

“I didn’t catch you,” she replied. “Although I will admit that I did ask for help in keeping you in the net. I apologize for how you were brought here.”

“I don’t need your apology. Just get me out of here. I’m a busy fox,” Hakuzosu shot back.

“Hey, why do you hate humans so much?” Kaori asked.

Hakuzosu scoffed. “I don’t have to tell you that.”

“Do you plan on hearing what Konoha has to say at all?”

“You keep my daughter’s name out of your filthy mouth!”

Kaori cast her eyes downward, somber and sad. “You...really hate humans a lot, huh?” She looked at Tasaburo-tanuki, and the old man stroked his beard. A breeze from outside blew through the room, rustling the mosquito net.

“Oh dear. Looks like this hate has some fairly deep roots,” he said. “By the way, Kaori, I believe you have done some research on his history, haven’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” Kaori nodded. “I figured I could find out why he hates humans so much if I dug into his folklore. Spirits are shaped by the stories told of them, after all. You can learn a lot about their way of life through these tales, so I thought his reason for hating humans would be hidden somewhere in them. Right, Konoha?”

“Right,” Konoha affirmed. She met her father’s eyes through the net. “As for me, I feel ashamed that I know so little about my own father.”

She let out a deep sigh and sat up straight, speaking with newfound resolve in her voice. “You’ve always put family first, haven’t you, Father?”

Hakuzosu was a spirit who donned the appearance of a human in order to convince hunters to stop killing foxes. He did this so he could protect his family.

On Mount Yume in the old Kai Province, there once lived an elderly white fox who worried night and day over the actions of a hunter called Yasaku. This hunter specialized in capturing foxes for their fur, and many a young white fox had fallen victim to him.

One day, the old white fox disguised himself as Yasaku's uncle, who was a priest called Hakuzosu. He explained to Yasaku the sin of killing in a bid to make him cease his hunting. It worked, and Yasaku promised he would stop, so long as Hakuzosu bought his traps from him, and the two struck a deal. Thus, the fox was able to protect any younger white foxes from losing their lives.

"It didn't last for long, however. After the funds Yasaku earned from selling his traps had run out, he returned to ask for some money," Noname said.

This was bad news for the white fox: He had to think fast, or Yasaku would find out that the one who talked him into quitting hunting wasn't the real Hakuzosu but a fox in disguise. If that happened, Yasaku would surely take up hunting again and possibly kill even more foxes out of spite. The fear of this possibility overtook the white fox, and he killed Hakuzosu, assuming the priest's identity completely.

"Now that the white fox had become Hakuzosu, he was able to send Yasaku away when the man came to ask for more money. Then, for more than fifty years after that, he remained at the temple and took over all of the original Hakuzosu's priestly duties, or so the story goes," Noname finished, glancing at Konoha and Kaori.

Kaori returned a big nod. "Yes. And that's where we noticed something *odd*."

"Indeed," Konoha agreed. "Considering all these events and my father's personality, I find this story to be very strange."

She bit her lip, trying to prepare herself for what she was about to ask.

"Father," she said, "why didn't you kill Yasaku?"

Hakuzosu scoffed, a delighted grin twisting his lips. "You think that Yasaku deserved to die too, eh? You see how ignorant these humans are in their willingness to slay so many innocent lives ruthlessly? They really just can't help themselves!"

“No!” Konoha shook her head vigorously. “I am suggesting no such thing. I only wanted to point out the discrepancy in your actions. Why disguise yourself as a priest when you could have saved yourself the trouble and...and just killed Yasaku? That would seem to be the most efficient route, and yet you didn’t take it...”

She balled her fist and pursed her lips, holding back the tears. “Something must have stopped you from doing so, right? So what happened?! This has everything to do with why you hate humans, hasn’t it?”

Hakuzosu stopped in his mental tracks as he saw his daughter’s desperation. He gazed into her precious face and smiled sweetly. “There’s no need for you to worry about that,” he said. “You just stay away from the filth in this world, okay?”

Konoha’s face crumpled like a flower left to wilt.

*Oh, now I’ve done it.* Hakuzosu’s heart stung with the pain of guilt, but he tried to tell himself that this was for her own good. He shot a venomous glare at Kaori and straightened himself.

“Keep out of my family’s business. This is not something a stranger, let alone a human, should stick their nose into.”

“Family, huh?” Noname scoffed, as if she had never heard anything more ridiculous. “Do you even hear yourself? Ugh.”

“You got a problem?” Hakuzosu said.

“Well, you’re not making any sense. You talk so much about family, and yet the only person you seem to care about is yourself,” Noname replied.

“You’re the one who’s not making sense. I’m doing all this for my daughter!”

“Ah, I really can’t deal with this. I think I might lose my mind,” Noname shrugged and turned to Konoha.

“Listen, don’t think that you have to stick with your father just because he’s family,” she said without a single hint of hesitation. “You’re always free to cut off people you hold no respect for. Children have the right to choose their parents too.”

“Noname... I...” Konoha murmured, struggling within herself.

“Don’t you dare put your weird ideas into Konoha’s head!” Hakuzosu spat, his face turning red. “She is never going to cut her own father out of her life!”

Noname glared back at him, her eyes cold as steel and as deadly as a blade ready to strike. Hakuzosu felt himself gulp at the sudden threat directed towards him.

“So you think you’re entitled to whatever you want from her because you’re her father, is that it? Konoha is a grown woman. She can make her own decisions and take responsibility for her own actions. So what if you have the same blood running through your veins? She can still decide if she needs you or not, and if she doesn’t, then she can cut you off if she wants. Get that into your head!”

Noname’s face scrunched with pain, and she put a hand to her heart. “You need to realize that children aren’t obligated to unconditionally accept their parents,” she continued. “Parents have to earn that right themselves. You have got to be joking with your ‘You just stay away from the filth in this world’ spiel. That just shows that deep down, you don’t see your daughter as an equal but as a doll for you to play with! A family should make its members feel like they’re respected and they belong!”

Hakuzosu realized that he had been shrinking back from Noname’s sudden surge of anger.

*How dare she...!* He opened his mouth to argue back, but the words just wouldn’t come. He sat there with his jaw agape and his ears ringing, feeling as though he had lost this fight. He knew he was correct, and yet his body shivered with a cold sweat.

*Stay strong. You have to, for Konoha!*

“Who do you think you are? You think you know what it means to be a parent? You don’t even have a real family yourself. That girl there isn’t even a spirit like you are—she’s a human. Ha... Ha ha ha... You run a pharmacy, but your mind has been tainted by these mortals! You’re a damn fool if you think you can speak to me like that!” he shouted in one breath. As the words left his lips, he felt triumphant at having won the argument.

However, not a second later, Konoha made a face he had never seen before, and the regret hit him like a train.

“How could you say something like that, Father?” she cried.

The disappointment and disgust on her face was more than Hakuzosu could bear. “No, I didn’t mean it!” he cried, but it was already too late.

“Let’s go. We’re only wasting our time by staying here,” Noname said and beckoned to the other girls, who agreed and stood up.

“No! Konoha, wait! What I meant was...”

But no matter how much he begged, Konoha would not favor him with even a single glance. Panicking, Hakuzosu pulled the mosquito net aside and crawled under it, but...

“What?!” he gasped.

The mosquito net was covered by another net.

“What’s going on?” his brows creased in confusion. He pulled the second net aside too, but there was another layer waiting for him. His anger boiled over and he tore at it, but yet another net appeared. Fed up, he tried to escape from another side, only to be met with more nets. There seemed to be no way out of his mesh prison.

“Ho ho ho ho!”

As Hakuzosu’s face turned pale in his vain struggle, a jolly chuckle resounded in the room. The fox turned to it with vexed eyes of rage and saw Tasaburo-tanuki stroking his beard cheerfully.

“Oh, thank you for showing how well this trap works. This is called the Kayatsuri-tanuki, but I’ve been neglecting it now that mosquito nets have gone out of use. And now, look at you! This is wonderful,” he laughed.

“There’s nothing wonderful about any of this! Get me out of here!” Hakuzosu howled. “You’re known for your good deeds, so do one!”

“Oh, you have gone too far. You should not have done that,” Tasaburo-tanuki said, his expression darkening. But the storm passed as quickly as it had come, and a smile returned to his bearded face.



“Well, this is all in jest. Totes chill, as the young’uns say. I suggest you keep flipping those nets if you ever want to get out. Now, how many nets left until you escape?”

“You think this is funny?!” Hakuzosu shouted. “You think this is a game? Take them down right now!”

“Oh, I don’t think this is a game, nor is it funny. Ho ho ho!” Tasaburo-tanuki chuckled as he watched the fox with amusement, but then his face turned serious.

“I also once sought to keep my loved ones ignorant of the filth in this world,” he said, looking up at the sky. Even from behind the net, the sorrow that lined the tanuki’s features was clear as day.

“That was nothing but my own hubris, however. For better or for worse, we do not have the right to choose what others can see and what they accept into their world.”

“What’s your point?”

“You’re free to interpret my words however you like,” Tasaburo-tanuki said. “But I will leave you with this: You may think you are shielding your daughter out of kindness, yet that does not necessarily make it a good deed.”

And with that, he left the room, leaving Hakuzosu alone in the silence.

*In any case, I have to get out of here,* he thought. Still, the words with which Noname and Tasaburo-tanuki had confronted him continued to spin around and around in his head.

Once he had broken past the thirty-sixth mosquito net, Hakuzosu was finally free.

He stumbled out of the room on shaky legs and was met with a sprawling traditional Japanese garden. The night sky was free of clouds, allowing the moon to shine at its brightest. Aside from a few traces of the earlier festivities, the garden was completely deserted, its lonely quietude punctuated by the faint light of a few lanterns.

“Konoha!” Hakuzosu shouted for his daughter to no avail. The wary thought of potentially falling into another trap hung in his mind, but he couldn’t afford to stand still, so he entered the garden with cautious steps.

“You have arrived at last. I must commend you for your efforts.”

Hakuzosu yelped as the glow of the lantern beside him flared, illuminating a man who was dressed like a mountain ascetic, his grin eerie in the light.

“I am known as Dansaburo. I assume my name is known to you, yes?”

“You’re another one of the Three Great Tanuki,” Hakuzosu said. “So I’m up against all three of you, am I? That’s not exactly ideal.” He shook his head in resignation.

Dansaburo-danuki tilted his head in slight bafflement and said, “Hmm, you seem different from the tales I have been told of you. I was warned to be wary of your violent outbursts and that when angered, you would grow so red in the face as to resemble an erupting Mount Fuji.”

Hakuzosu sighed. “If you’re trying to provoke me, then you’re out of luck. I’m far too tired from fighting those mosquito nets.”

“I see. Once more, I recognize and commend your efforts.”

Hakuzosu frowned, unable to tell if the tanuki was being serious. “Are you here to lecture me too? Save it for someone else,” he said, shoulders sagging.

Dansaburo-danuki’s eyes widened in surprise. “Lecture? Nay, I have no words to offer anyone, having recently been made cognizant of my own painful ignorance.”

“Painful ignorance? You, one of the most distinguished tanuki of our history?”

“Yes,” he answered. “You see, a few years ago, my children lost their lives.”

Hakuzosu swallowed, unsure of what to make of the sudden confession except to say “Oh, um...”

“I apologize for my bluntness. But, putting that aside, I must speak of how my ignorance led me in pursuit of the wrong goal. Blinded by my love for my children, I chose an incorrect path.”

“...So? What happened, then?” Hakuzosu asked.

“It is difficult to admit, but I was caught entirely unawares by a young man and two Tengu twins! They demonstrated the true meaninglessness of my efforts in recent years,” Dansaburo-danuki laughed, a little embarrassed, but he quickly turned serious again.

“You have my sympathies, Hakuzosu. I feel your pain as if it were my own. We must needs see our lovely children as small, weak things that we are duty-bound to protect. And only we ourselves can comprehend our torment when we fail to fulfill that duty. It is a pain like no other, is it not?”

“You... You understand?” Hakuzosu whispered, a sore lump forming in his throat.

Dansaburo-danuki grinned, toothy and cheery. “I do. I know how you have labored to ease your daughter’s life. Your efforts on her behalf are manifold.”

Hakuzosu felt his breath catch in his throat, and the tanuki rested a hand on his back.

“We fathers must bear our share of troubles, but so do our children. However, unlike mine, your daughter remains among the living. You must do your utmost to support her. Do not let yourself fall prey to the sin of ignorance. Strive to better know your daughter, and likewise enable her to learn about you.”

Hakuzosu felt a push from the hand on his back. As he stumbled, he noticed a large river flowing before his eyes, with three bridges stretched across it. Confused, he turned around, but Dansaburo-danuki was nowhere to be seen.

His voice could be heard, however. “In the old province of Awa, there was a bridge known as the Watauchi. Many tanuki who enjoyed assuming the visage of humans dwelt there, and they would often create illusory bridges to deceive people into falling in the river. They caused a tremendous vexation with this jest.”

“So you’re going to drop me into the river as punishment?” Hakuzosu fumed.

“No, no! You must simply select the correct bridge. Then you will not fall.”

“The correct bridge...?” Hakuzosu stared at the three before him. They were all made of stone and completely ordinary. The only noticeable difference between them were the figures standing at the end of each one. They all wore white dresses, and their faces were so similar that they could be triplets, but they each differed ever so slightly.

“Three Konohas...” Hakuzosu muttered.

“Your daughter desires to know whether her father can find her,” Dansaburo-danuki explained.

“But why?” the fox asked.

“If I were to speculate, I would like to suggest that she can no longer stand being unheard by you.”

The words stung Hakuzosu like arrows, and he felt tears threatening to rush forth.

This was Konoha’s test to see if he loved her.

He exhaled. While he and Dansaburo-danuki were talking, the raging flame of hate within him had settled down, and his calm had returned.

He sucked in a deep breath and said to the hidden tanuki, “Thank you for hearing me out. Would you allow me to visit your children’s graves sometime?”

“Of course. And from one father to another, I wish you good fortune.”

“...Thank you.”

There was no longer any trace of Dansaburo-danuki, and Hakuzosu let out a wry chuckle.

*No words to offer anyone, huh? And yet, look at how much you shared with me.*

He looked straight ahead, his mind refreshed, and walked toward one of the Konohas without a moment of hesitation.

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Even from where I was standing, I could see Konoha desperately fighting back the tears. And, as I watched Hakuzosu stop in front of her, I could feel a small

bundle of warmth rise in my chest too.

Only one of the three bridges had the real Konoha standing at the end of it. Usually, if someone were faced with this sort of dilemma, they would take some time to make their choice, but Hakuzosu did not pause to think for even one second and still selected the correct bridge. Konoha had set up this test to see if her father really cared about her, and now that she had her answer, her eyes welled with tears of surprise and relief.

The other two Konohas were played by Tsukiko and me. We undid the transformation spell and took a few steps back with Noname and Tasaburo-tanuki to give Hakuzosu a little space.

“Good grief. Did you really have to bring the Three Great Tanuki out here for this? What a royal mess this has become,” the fox murmured, the weariness heavy in his voice.

“Well, you did threaten to destroy the bookstore,” Konoha said.

“Ha. That I did.”

Hakuzosu had evidently calmed down before he arrived here. He was completely different from the fuming and spitting fox we had seen earlier.

“Do you really love that human so much?” he muttered.

“I do,” Konoha said, the tears forming huge drops in her eyes. “He helped me discover what love feels like.”

“...I see.”

His expression darkened, and he looked over at us. “First, allow me to apologize,” he said solemnly. “I was not in the right state of mind to listen to what you had to say.”

Konoha nodded. “That really wasn’t like you.”

“Yes,” Hakuzosu agreed. “But I’ve had my eyes opened now. If it weren’t for this wake-up call, I really might have lost my daughter’s love like the apothecary said.”

He sounded kind and gentle now, a stark difference from the Hakuzosu I had seen before. Now, I could better imagine the two foxes spending their days

peacefully together. Maybe he could even come around on his daughter's relationship.

"But... Konoha, I cannot and will not ever allow you to date a human," he stated flatly, going completely against my prayers.

Konoha gasped, her face crumbling. She gulped back her shock and asked with a trembling voice, "But why? Why are you so against me loving a human?"

Hakuzosu shook his head, but there was no energy left. He began to explain, his voice sorrowful.

"The answer to that question lies in my folklore, just as you and the human girl guessed. I was cursed by the priest called Hakuzosu and forced to carry on his duties for more than fifty years. This curse was also the reason why I couldn't kill Yasaku."

*So Konoha's dad was cursed by the human Hakuzosu whose identity he tried to assume?*

"At first, I wanted to kill both Hakuzosu and Yasaku, especially now that Yasaku had squandered the chance I gave him. I planned to first kill the priest, then lie in wait for Yasaku to come and beg for money, so I snuck into Hakuzosu's room one night."

The sky was moonless when the white fox infiltrated Hakuzosu's home. The priest was wide awake, but he wasn't disturbed at all when he saw his uninvited visitor, even offering the fox some tea.

"He knew that I had used his identity to sway Yasaku and apologized sincerely for his nephew's wrongdoing, going so far as to offer his own life as penance."

However, in exchange, Hakuzosu wanted the white fox to swear that his nephew's life would be spared. If Yasaku were to ever go missing or be killed by a fox, he warned, all the local hunters would comb Mount Yume from peak to foot, and they would not hold back on their slaying.

The white fox asked Hakuzosu why he would make such a threat, but the answer was simple.

"Hakuzosu wanted to protect Yasaku because he was family."

Hearing the word “family,” an indescribable expression settled on Konoha’s face. She felt it was unjust for the priest to make such a request when Yasaku was the one who had slain her father’s relatives first.

“That’s terrible,” she said. “And yet you still accepted his proposal?”

“I did. At that point, I felt as though my family were being held hostage, so I didn’t have a choice. Hakuzosu also suggested that I assume his identity and live among humans, believing that it would help me warm up to them and forgive Yasaku for all the killing he had done.”

The white fox accepted, killed the priest, and assumed his identity. However, in the years that passed, Hakuzosu never felt any catharsis. In fact, his resentment only grew worse.

“I spent fifty long years living and working as a priest. It was a torturous half-century where I was plagued with sickening rage.”

Fifty years. That was how long Yasaku lived too. And during that time, he never showed a single sign of remorse. Again and again, he came to Hakuzosu’s doorstep asking for money and saying that if he didn’t get what he wanted, he would go back to hunting foxes. Hakuzosu was then forced to scramble for funds, but soon after he handed the money over, Yasaku would return with nothing in his pockets. Living through this day after day after day was like hell to the fox.

“Every time I saw that man’s face, I felt a murderous rage rise within me. How can anyone expect me to warm up to humans when I was forced to confront this madness?!” he raised his voice but caught himself and released a long sigh.

“Of course, during this time, I met other people too, both good and bad. But still, none of them were able to change how I felt, which is why I feel this hate so strongly to this day. I can never forgive Yasaku for slaughtering my family so mercilessly and caring so little about it.”

He clutched at his chest. “I can’t forgive myself for being so foolish and weak and letting my family die, either,” he whispered, “and I don’t know if I ever will. That’s why I can never find it in myself to like or trust humans, nor do I want to let any of them have my daughter.”

The tears that had been building in Konoha's eyes suddenly rolled down her cheeks in huge beads and fell to the ground. However, she kept her head high. "But even so, I love Yoruhito-san. I want to believe that the man I love would never hurt anyone the way Yasaku hurt you," she said boldly as she looked straight into her father's eyes, even as the tears kept rolling and even as the agony of her father's bitter past stung her heart.

"Konoha..." Hakuzosu muttered.

The girl wiped her tears and tried to force a smile through the pain. "I know how you feel, and that's exactly why this hurts me so much. I love Yoruhito-san, but I also love you, Father."

Hakuzosu's face crumpled, and his lip trembled. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, but I really can't just say yes to this," he choked out with great effort.

"I see," Konoha said, her expression gloomy. I looked away from the two. This was the closest they had ever come to agreeing with each other, but there were still things that neither of them could compromise on, precisely because they cared so much about each other as family. Their biggest hurdle was their mutual wish for happiness. It hurt to see because they were so close, yet so far.

"Noname..." I gripped her hand, and she gripped mine back.

"There's nothing much we can do," she said. "There probably isn't a correct answer to be found, either. Being family doesn't guarantee that you will be on the same wavelength."

"But if we just leave things be..."

"Right, it could get worse," she nodded. "Worst-case scenario, this could lead to their family fracturing and splitting apart."

Hearing Noname, Konoha grew frightened. She started to fidget, and her eyes wandered to and fro as she tried to wrestle with the scales in her heart weighing her family and her love, neither of which she could bring herself to abandon.

I steadied myself. "Um, Hakuzosu..." I began, and the fox turned to me. He seemed like a listless shell of himself.



*I have to do what I can*, I thought, and suddenly I saw Shinonome-san in my mind.

I gulped. “What if instead of protecting Konoha, you just stayed by her side and supported her that way?”

Silence.

“To me, a father should be someone who acts as a pillar of support instead of a shield. I would want him to make a safe place for me to return to when I’m hurt. He should be someone who would wipe my tears away when I’m sad, who would tell me that everything will be okay when I’m going through a rough patch, who would reassure me that he’d always be there for me, and who would always be able to lend me a reliable hand when I need his help.”

“You...” Hakuzosu started but shut his mouth. Then, he looked into my eyes and asked, “Is that how Shinonome’s always protected you?”

“Yes,” I answered.

He gave me a nod. It was long, almost like a bow, and he seemed to be on the brink of tears.

“Right. Of course. That’s just the kind of guy he is,” he whispered and squeezed his eyes shut in anguish. “Ha ha ha. Parenting sure is hard. I’m starting to think that I may not even have the right to be a father.” He muttered again to himself and bit his lip.

Then, something made him look up. It was Konoha, taking his hands in hers.

“No, Father, you just have a different way of approaching things, that’s all. I’m not completely blameless, either.”

“All you did was fall in love. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“No,” she shook her head. “I was naive, as Tamamo-no-Mae had pointed out to me. I let my emotions take over, and I failed to think about what kind of future I would be walking into with a human boyfriend.”

She drew her father into an embrace. “We’re family, so let’s talk more and fight more, and work out what the best option is together. Both for this and for everything else in the future,” she said, her voice trembling.

“Are you sure you want someone like me helping with your decisions?” Hakuzosu asked.

“Of course. I want you here with me because you’re my father. You’ve raised me since I was a little fox, and I know that I can fight through anything, no matter how difficult or painful it is, if I have your support. I’ll go off into the world on my own one day, but until then, I want you to stay close by my side because I love you,” Konoha said, smiling through the tears falling from her eyes.

Despite her words, she was probably still struggling to ignore the sadness caused by this whole incident. No doubt those tears were a result of all her pent-up misery. She and her father needed time and the opportunity to have a heart-to-heart more than anything right now.

At a glance, families might seem to be strong and unbreakable, but look closer and you may find that they can actually be quite fragile, being prone to fall apart if you so much as miss the right opportunity to talk things out.

*I hope they both can agree on a way to solve this...*

Konoha must have been thinking the same thing because she giggled and said to Hakuzosu, “So don’t say that you’re going to destroy the bookstore anymore, okay?”

“All right,” Hakuzosu agreed, his four tails swaying back and forth peacefully. “I’ll go and apologize to Shinonome later with plenty of his favorite drink.”

*I guess all’s well that ends well, I thought, sighing with relief. All that’s left is for the two of them to figure things out between themselves.* I wiped the sweat from my face, but suddenly a loud bawling burst through the air.

“Waaaaaahhh! Oh, look at those two! I hope they stay a happy family foreveeer!” Noname sobbed. Her face was a mess, and she was mopping her tears with a handkerchief, smearing her mascara in watery black streaks all around her eyes.

“Noname!” I gasped. “Oh my gosh, your face! Here, I’ve got a mirror.”

“Huh?” she paused to look. “AAAAAAGH! No! Look away! I can’t let anyone see me like this!”

“Oho! Interrupting our emotional scene here is a teary-eyed monster! It’s the perfect way to end things, wouldn’t you agree, Dansaburo?”

“Tasaburo-dono, you had best hold your tongue or else you may find yourself in need of a visit to the apothecary...”

But despite the sudden merriment, the staring contest Noname was having with her shocked self in the mirror, and the jolly spirits trying their hardest to hold back their laughter, I heard something that made my blood run cold.

*Tinkle.*

It was the crisp chime of a bell, and a shrill voice that cried, “Hakuzosu-no-ojisama, how could you stomp all over Konoha’s wish like this?! You’re doing nothing to help her achieve it!”

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Meanwhile...

Suimei, Tamaki, the Tengu twins, and Kuro, along with Shibaemon-tanuki, had climbed atop the roof of the estate and were watching Kaori’s party from afar. They could see that Konoha and Hakuzosu were discussing something or other, but it was taking quite some time, and the twins were growing restless.

“Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey you, old man tanuki! Can we go play with Kaori?” Ginme whined.

“You’re a cheeky little thing, aren’t you?” Shibaemon-tanuki said. “Not that I hate cheekiness but settle down, just for today at least.”

“Aww, why you gotta be like this? All we wanna do is mess things up juuust a little.”

“You’re Kinme, right? How ’bout I crack your head right open, eh?!”

As the three fought quietly, Suimei followed Kaori with his eyes while Kuro nested in his arms.

“Looks like Kaori’s found more trouble for herself, huh, Suimei?” the Inugami said.

“She just can’t keep herself out of it,” Suimei sighed. “She should’ve just stayed put at the bookstore.”

“Ah ha ha!” Kuro laughed. “You can’t expect Kaori to do that, can you?”

Suimei pulled a face.

In his hand he held the letter from Kaori, which he had just received. It detailed the plan she was going to carry out, and one particular line in it stuck out to him.

“Why is this the first time I’m hearing about the mermaid butcher possibly getting involved?” he muttered to himself, although there was no way Kaori would actually hear him. As he lamented just how little he knew, Tamaki appeared beside him.

“Sorry about this whole thing. Timing couldn’t have been worse, eh?”

“Huh? For what?” Suimei frowned, unclear as to why the other man was apologizing. Tamaki turned his cloudy right eye over to Suimei and grinned slyly.

“Well, you want to spend all the time you can get with the one you love, right?”

“Wha...? Wh-wh-what are you...?!” the exorcist blushed.

Tamaki laughed. “I don’t blame you. I was like that once too.”

Suimei immediately found this odd. Tamaki would usually never say something like this.

“Why tell me that?” Suimei asked, suspicious.

“Probably because I’ve been thinking a lot about the love of my life recently,” Tamaki said gently.

Suimei blinked. He wasn’t used to seeing such a tender, romantic look in the story-seller’s eyes. “Oh? Are you gonna go and see them after everything’s over?”

There was no way Suimei knew any of Tamaki’s past, but the boy must have sensed some of it when he asked that question. The story-seller’s eyes widened in surprise, but he soon relaxed.

“Yeah. I’m going to go and see her right after I give that rotten mermaid butcher what they deserve.”

“Do you have to do that to see her or something?” Suimei asked.

“You could say that,” Tamaki replied. “I need to do my job properly first, though. Can you imagine reading a story where the prince goes to save the princess, but she ends up chewing him out? Totally uncool.”

“...Yeah, I’d hate to be the prince in that case,” Suimei chuckled at Tamaki. Then he grinned, his eyes shining with boldness. “I guess this means we’d better get things wrapped up quickly then, huh? You want to spend all the time you can get with the one you love, don’t you?”

“Ha!” Tamaki laughed. “Ha ha ha. Yeah, I do.”

Suimei thought that the story-seller seemed a lot friendlier and more approachable when he laughed so heartily. He took this chance to strike up a rare conversation with Tamaki.

Then...

*Tinkle.*

It was the sound of a bell. The two men gasped.

Then there was a cry, filled with sorrow and grief: “Hakuzosu-no-ojisama, how could you stomp all over Konoha’s wish like this?! You’re doing nothing to help her achieve it!” The moment it registered in Tamaki’s ears, he jumped to his feet and took off. Kaori and the others were acting strangely. Maybe the mermaid butcher had finally appeared!

“Let’s go!”

Suimei signaled to the Tengu twins with a glance, and they followed. The exorcist could feel his heart thumping heavily in his chest. He had waited so long to finally be reunited with Kaori, but it looked like this was going to be another meeting filled with trouble and turmoil.

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The one who had shouted was Tsukiko. She was agitated and breathing heavily, her eyes lit by something fiery behind her colored glasses.

“This is going nowhere. You’re Konoha’s father, for crying out loud! I thought I should stay out of this at first because it *is* a family matter, but I just couldn’t stay quiet anymore. Look at you! Not only did you fail to grant your daughter the one thing she wishes for, but you made her cry at the end too! How can you call yourself a father?!”

“Tsukiko!” Konoha gasped, unable to hide her bewilderment. “How can you say that?”

The tanuki girl turned to her friend and smiled. “Everything’s going to be all right. Just wait a little longer for me, okay?”

*Tinkle.*

She gave the bell in her hand a harder shake, and its sound echoed through the air. The shadow by her feet suddenly began to bubble like lava.

“I’m the only one who can grant Konoha’s wish for her,” she said as if she were in a trance. A hand began to reach out of the shadow, as if it were trying to pull its physical form together. There was something so...*wrong* about it, but no one could take their eyes off it, even as it made everyone at the scene shiver.

Finally, from the darkness, out slithered a man. “Whew! Ooh, what’s this? Is it finally my time to shine?” he said. He had suntanned skin and hair as black as a moonless night that fell to his waist. His eyes were a venomous green, and their brightness accentuated every move he made in the shadow. He wore a kosode kimono, and over it was a grass skirt like a traditional fisherman might wear. A basket for holding newly caught fish hung from his hip. He was the spitting image of a fairy tale character. No one would be surprised if he suddenly rescued a turtle and set off for the underwater Dragon Palace.

“Who... Who the hell are you?!” Hakuzosu snarled, stepping in front of Konoha to shield her. The stranger simply freed the metal hook that was wedged in his belt, looked at the shadow on the ground...and plunged the hook in, arm and all.

“Wh... What?” None of us knew what he was doing, but the man only hummed as he pulled something out from the ground.

I almost screamed when I saw what he had dragged out with his hook. It was a giant fish, about a meter long, with the face of a human baby.

“Is that...a mermaid?” Noname whispered, her face frozen with horror.

“Righto!” the man said. He spun around like a circus clown and bowed with a crooked grin. “I do believe this is our first meeting. I am a seller of mermaid meat, a savior who gives out hopes and dreams and eternal life! It’s a pleasure to meet you all. Now, which one of you would like to have your wish granted with some mermaid meat? You can wish for aaanything you want, and as a bonus you’ll get a side of immortality for free! I must say, you folks are real lucky. With a bit of mermaid meat, all your worries will be blown sky-high!”

He gazed at the mermaid in fascination and murmured dreamily, “Happiness begins with eternity. Now, tell me what it is your heart desires, and I will save you.”

We continued to stare in shock, but the mermaid butcher blabbered on regardless.

“You know, mermaid meat is very delicious,” he said. “Have it as sashimi, boil it with some soy sauce, grill it, you name it. Oh, and the liver? Impeccable. Slap on some liver soy sauce and I guarantee you’ll be hooked for life. So, how would you like to prepare it?”

I couldn’t help but tremble at his speech. Every time he raised his metal hook, the mermaid’s face would contort in agony, but he would ignore it and keep talking as if he were a simple fisherman selling his wares at the market. I felt disgusted, unable to shake the feeling that he was selling a human child rather than a fish. I could feel myself turning pale, but then Noname wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

“Just hold on a minute. What are you here for? None of us here need your shady mermaid meat,” she said.

“Hm? Are you sure about that?” the butcher cocked his head quizzically.

Then Tsukiko cried out, “Excuse me, but did you forget that Konoha’s still here?”

The fox blinked in surprise. “Huh? Me?”

Her friend turned to her and smiled sweetly. “Well, yeah! Your wish still hasn’t been granted yet, has it?”

“No, but...”

As Konoha trembled with uncertainty, Tsukiko pointed at the mermaid butcher. “Then just tell him what you want. You’d be happier if you could be with the one you love, right?”

Konoha frowned in confusion at Tsukiko’s bold statement.

*What is going on?* I thought. Did Tsukiko not want the mermaid butcher to grant a wish of her own? Why was she now resorting to mermaid meat to help Konoha get the very thing she’d told the fox to give up on? Her actions weren’t making any sense. While I remained deep in thought, the tanuki turned to her friend.

“While I listened to you and your dad talk, I wondered, ‘What would it take for Konoha and Yoruhito to stay together?’” she continued. “Well, Hakuzosu hates humans. He can’t stand them or trust them, so that leaves only one option.”

Her eyes gleamed with an unnerving light. “All we need to do is make Yoruhito a spirit so he stops being human.”

Konoha’s face twisted in disbelief at how nonchalantly Tsukiko made such a suggestion. “What are you saying?” she gasped. “That’s not something I can decide for him, either!”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why? It should be obvious why that’s wrong!”

“I don’t see a problem with it,” Tsukiko said. Konoha, turned pale with shock. Her ears twitched in anxiety, and her purple ribbon wobbled uneasily.

“How could you say that?” she murmured, unable to figure out the explanation.

“What do you mean? I just want you to be happy,” Tsukiko said, the moon reflecting in her glasses. “Oh! Is it because you don’t want to be immortal?”



Then...I'd gladly take that immortality for you. Problem solved."

"That's not..."

An uncomfortable silence fell between the two. A crack had clearly appeared in their fundamental thoughts, even if they hadn't said so out loud.

"My oh my, how cruel the fox girl is! I feel sorry for the tanuki girl, indeed," said a charming voice.

A fierce gale began to blow, so forcefully that I was forced to squeeze my eyes shut. The scent of perfume began to tickle my nose. I recognized the smell from somewhere...the shinden-zukuri estate!

The biting wind was accompanied by Tamamo-no-Mae. Her junihitoe robes had been ruffled by the storm. She pressed her body up against Tsukiko and traced a finger along the tanuki's jawline.

"Tell me now, what do you see in that thickheaded friend of yours? No matter how much you devote yourself to her, it doesn't seem like she's going to notice."

"...Stop it!" Tsukiko gasped, pushing Tamamo-no-Mae aside as her cheeks grew red. She stumbled backward and shouted, "Sh-shut up! This is none of your business!"

My eyes widened. I had never seen her get so emotional before. The nine-tailed fox must have hit a nerve.

"You're here now too, Tamamo-no-Mae? Care to tell us why?" Hakuzosu asked, confused. The lady fox simply hid behind her cypress fan and giggled.

"Ho ho ho. Surely this isn't anything out of the ordinary. Unlike humans, we're prone to devoting ourselves to those we feel gratitude toward, often to our detriment." Then she reached into her robes and produced a book.

It was *Niimi Nankichi's Stories for Children*.

"Oh!" Tsukiko gasped, eyes bulging with astonishment as she recognized the book she had dropped.

"Now then, I should get started with my work too. You wanted my help in arguing a case for Konoha's wish, correct? Then the tale of this foolish tanuki

girl must not be left untold. Poor Tsukiko, so lonely, her efforts all wasting away unnoticed. Once the fox girl hears it, I am sure she will grow sympathetic.”

She slid a nimble finger over the cover of the book and opened it to a bookmarked page. “Tsukiko’s motive is hidden within these pages. You are all familiar with the story called *Gon, the Little Fox*, I am sure.”

I nodded. “Yes. It’s a children’s story written by Niimi Nankichi.”

Gon, the orphan protagonist of the story, was a mischievous little fox who brought the people of his local village more trouble than they liked. One day, he spotted a man called Hyoju, who had caught an eel for his sick mother. Gon, unable to resist his cheeky impulses, stole the eel while Hyoju had his back turned. A few days later, the fox saw the man holding a funeral for his mother. As Gon watched, he thought to himself, *Hyoju’s mother must have died wishing for even a single bite of that eel*, and began to regret what he had done.

He felt great sympathy for the man who was now an orphan just like him, and so he started to gift Hyoju with the bounties he had hunted and gathered from the forest and the river. Hyoju never found out who had been leaving him these gifts, but even so, Gon never stopped.

The ending was definitely the story’s most memorable part.

One day, Hyoju found that Gon had snuck into his house. Assuming the fox was there for more trickery, the man took his matchlock gun and shot Gon. It was only then that he realized Gon had been the one bringing him all those gifts.

“Wait, Gon... You were the one who gave me all those chestnuts?” he said, and there the story closed.

“It was first published in a children’s magazine called *Akai Tori*, and I’m sure that even back then, the children found it to be a sad but beautiful story,” I said.

It was a masterpiece that never failed to pull at the heartstrings, weaving the idyllic country landscape with the tragic end of the playful and innocent Gon. It was often featured in the textbooks of young children, and students would often cry in the middle of class after reading it too.

This was the story that Tsukiko had bookmarked, but did it have anything to

do with the matter at hand?

“Don’t you see it yet? This girl is just like Gon, devoting her entire self to the fox girl in hopes of redeeming herself,” Tamamo-no-Mae said.

I stared at Tsukiko, surprised. The tanuki stayed quiet with no reply of her own.

“I talked with Shibaemon-tanuki’s underlings to pass the time, and what do you know, I found some intriguing information,” Tamamo-no-Mae continued. “The tanuki girl had quite a rough time when she was younger. She shut herself away in a narrow cave and buried her heart even deeper, cutting herself off from the outside world entirely.”

Worried for his daughter, Shibaemon-tanuki did everything he could think of to bring her outside, with no luck at all. Then, one day, he brought Konoha over to visit.

“Shibaemon-tanuki had been friends with Hakuzosu for a very long time, and he figured that the fox girl might be able to help his daughter because she was around the same age. However, things did not go smoothly, did they, Konoha?”

The color left Konoha’s face when she sensed Tamamo-no-Mae’s glance, but she nodded. “Tsukiko was like a wild beast back then...”

When the two met, Tsukiko showed no sign of warming up to Konoha, instead baring her teeth, growling, and even attacking Konoha when she tried to approach.

And then things came to a head.

“I got careless one day, and I tried to get closer to Tsukiko than I had ever been before. She snarled at me and tried to maul me, and then...”

She touched a hand to her right ear, and its purple ribbon shook softly.

“...she tore my ear.”

“Stop it!” Tsukiko cried, her sorrowful plea tearing through the air. She stormed over to Tamamo-no-Mae and ripped the book out of her hands, hugging it close to her chest.

“Please, stop. Don’t make me remember that,” she said, tears falling and

voice quivering.

“Tsukiko...” Konoha whispered, her brows furrowed in pain. “Are you still hung up on that?” she asked gently.

The tanuki said nothing.

“I really meant it when I said it was fine. I honestly don’t hold it against you, I promise.”

Still, Tsukiko remained silent.

As if speaking for her, Tamamo-no-Mae said, “However, it seems that the regret continues to live inside of her. Her dedication to the fox girl is truly commendable! I say, it must have been fun living your life and having the tanuki girl grant all your wishes, hm?”

Konoha’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

Her head swooped toward her friend, who returned her gaze without much emotion. It sounded too far from the truth to be real, but to be honest, I could believe it. From what Konoha had said during our time together, it sounded like Tsukiko had a major hand in a lot of things.

“No problem is too big for this fox and tanuki pair!”

“If anything comes up, I know you’ll help me get solve it in a snap. I can always count on you.”

That was a testament to Tsukiko’s devotion to Konoha, and in a way, granting someone’s wishes without their knowledge must have been quite the weight to shoulder. I couldn’t even begin to imagine how tough it must have been for Tsukiko.

Suddenly, it hit me. I finally understood why she did what she did!

“Oh, that’s why Tsukiko went from supporting Konoha’s relationship to telling her to give up on it! It was all so she could help grant Konoha’s wish!”

The support was because Konoha wanted her relationship with Yoruhito to continue. The encouragement to give up was because Konoha thought she would be better off breaking up with Yoruhito in her despair at her own naivety. Tsukiko must have also lent Konoha the book that inspired her interest in the

human world because Konoha wished for a way to pass her uneventful days. And, as a result, Konoha also wished to visit the human world. Every step of the way, Tsukiko was there to help her get whatever she wanted.

“Exactly!” Tamamo-no-Mae said. “Everything you did was for the fox girl. Isn’t that right, Tsukiko?”

Then, her face took on a terrifying and cruel appearance, and she said something that shook us all to our core.

“And when she wished for her own fairy tale love, you brought that human man into the picture, didn’t you?”

“What...?” Konoha’s mouth fell open, the words not yet clicking in her head. She turned slowly to her friend, who did nothing to deny what Tamamo-no-Mae had said.

“No... No, this can’t be true... Tell me she’s wrong, Tsukiko...”

Konoha had turned white as a sheet, and she reached a shaky hand out to the tanuki. “Yoruhito-san and I met because it was fate, right? Right?” she pleaded in a weak voice.

Tsukiko shook her head with great effort and pain. “I’m sorry, Konoha.”

With a gasp, the fox’s knees gave out, and she collapsed to the floor. All she could do was stare up at Tsukiko with dazed, tearful eyes. Tsukiko looked back down at her friend, her face blank.

She clenched a hand near her chest. “I swore I would take this to my grave, but I guess that’s not happening anymore.”

Defeated, she removed her glasses and spoke quietly. “My beautiful Konoha... I felt a duty to grant your every wish, no matter what it took, so I could repent for what I did to you.”

Tsukiko had shut herself away because her vision was too keen, to a point where it was detrimental. Some humans had this condition too. Because she was born with overly sensitive sight, the sunlight would prick her eyes if she opened them during the day and they would water endlessly. The world was simply too bright for her, and she grew to hate the sun, eventually falling into a

deep depression.

“The world was overflowing with light, as if it were trying to force me out, but everyone seemed to think it was no big deal and kept trying to drag me outside. They would say, ‘it’s only a bit of light, you can handle it,’ even when I would constantly cry over how painful and hard it was for me to deal with. The only kindness I found was in darkness.”

Humans had the option of seeking medical treatment, but spirits had no such concept. Even though their realm had apothecaries, spirits would generally try to tend to their own wounds and ailments themselves. In a world where that was considered common sense, Tsukiko was never offered any understanding of her condition.

“I rejected the world that rejected me. I pushed everything aside and holed up deep inside of a cave, ready to live and die in there.”

Until, one day, Konoha came.

“Konoha called out to me so kindly. When she did, I was overjoyed, and I thought that she would be different from everyone else I had met. But when I realized that she was here to try and make me leave the cave, I lashed out against her.”

When Konoha began to test her luck and approached Tsukiko closer than before, Tsukiko’s fear kicked in and she latched onto Konoha’s ear with her teeth.

“AAAAAHHHHHH!!!”

Konoha’s shrill scream of pain snapped Tsukiko back to her senses, and she realized she had done something terrible. She faltered and opened her mouth, and Konoha ran out of the cave with blood flowing from her wound. Tsukiko chased the fox all the way out of the cave. The sun had already set, and the moon was peeking out from behind a veil of clouds, dousing the world below in its pale light.

Tsukiko eventually found Konoha collapsed on the ground, barely sitting up, and dashed over to her. The tanuki apologized over and over, trying to say that she didn’t mean to attack the fox, but even as Konoha’s face grew ashen from

the blood loss, she said, “Oh, you finally came outside! I’m so proud of you!”

She must have been in unbearable pain, and yet she smiled so genuinely at Tsukiko.

“I’d never seen anything so beautiful before. I was immediately taken with her smile,” Tsukiko whispered, her eyes welling up.

“It was the first time I had felt like that about anyone, and I sensed something inside of me change. Konoha had swept into my gray world and filled it with color...”

But the changes didn’t stop there. Konoha took the time to understand Tsukiko’s condition and helped think of different ways for her to live more comfortably with it, including the colored glasses and hat Tsukiko now wore all the time.

“I’m only able to go outside now because of Konoha. With these glasses, I’m not afraid of being rejected by the world anymore, and I can see whatever I want without being scared. I went out to get a good look at everything I could to make up for lost time, but I never found anything quite as beautiful as Konoha. I was quite surprised to find that nothing out there could outshine her.”

Tsukiko cast her glance to Konoha, and her face fell.

“And yet I had marred her.”

Beautiful, beautiful Konoha, with her right ear so cruelly torn...

“I couldn’t forgive myself for committing such a grave sin. I even considered giving my life to make up for it, but that wasn’t enough. So, instead, I decided to do my best to give Konoha anything and everything she wanted.”

She wanted to protect her friend and keep her smiling at all costs, and so her days grew busier and busier.

“All of Konoha’s wishes at the beginning were small things, like wanting to eat specific desserts, going out somewhere to have fun, making up with someone after a fight, that sort of thing. The world she lived in was quite small, so I had no trouble granting her wishes. However, that all changed after she picked up

reading.”

With every page Konoha read, her world began to expand at a tremendous rate, and her wishes also became more complex.

“I started to panic, because I realized that one day she was going to have a wish that I wouldn’t be able to grant, and I couldn’t bear the thought of it breaking her heart. I worried over it so much that I started losing sleep, but I just didn’t know what I could do about it.”

Then, rumors of the mermaid butcher reached her. Seeing it as her last straw to grasp at, Tsukiko set off for the spirit world and bought all the bells she could carry from a stall. She desperately prayed day and night for the mermaid butcher to come. Her nights turned sleepless, and she even started to contemplate death again.

Finally, one day, the mermaid butcher appeared before her.

“I felt so relieved, knowing I had something that could help Konoha get whatever she wanted.”

Tsukiko had been speaking fervently for a while now, but the fox was beginning to notice something darker stirring in the tanuki’s eyes. The realization began to trickle down her cheeks in the form of tears. Tsukiko continued, not realizing that her friend was frozen and watching her in terror.

“Hey, Konoha. Come on, go and have your wish granted. You’ll get your happy ending, I promise. Mermaid meat can do anything and make any dream come true. If things don’t work out with Yoruhito, I’ll get another man for you. With my magic, I can spin a fairy-tale romance any way you want with any man...”

She grasped Konoha’s hands, her cheeks a rosy red. “I’ll make sure you get whatever you wish for, so please, keep smiling.”

“Ohhh...” Konoha gasped, quivering. “This is all my fault. Tsukiko’s become so twisted because of me.”

She yanked her hands away from Tsukiko and slowly backed away, finally struck by the weight of spending her days completely ignorant of her friend’s dedication and all the abnormalities that surrounded it.



Tamamo-no-Mae, who had been watching the events unfold quietly, broke into a wide grin and whispered into Tsukiko's ear. "Oh dear, I wonder why she's crying. All you did was assure her that you would grant any wish she had, but it seems she's rejecting your offer."

"That's all right," Tsukiko said, and Tamamo-no-Mae's eyes widened. The tanuki squeezed the book of Niimi Nankichi's tales closer to her chest, and she closed her eyes solemnly.

"I'm fully aware of how much I've forced my way into this. I see a lot of myself in Gon, with how one-sided his attempt at atonement was, right down to the way he sometimes brought harm with his actions. I've already prepared myself for the day I may be shot like he was."

She smiled wistfully at the mermaid butcher. "Please, I beg you to save Konoha. Her wishes have gone far beyond what I can grant for her..."

"You got it, boss! I can make anyone happy with my mermaid meat, for sure!" he grinned, and Tsukiko relaxed like a weight had been lifted. She opened her mouth again to say something else, but no words came out, for Konoha's palm came swooping in against the skin of her cheek.

*Slap!*

It was so forceful and perfectly landed that everyone watching flinched. Konoha glared at Tsukiko, who responded with a dazed look, and the fox pulled her friend into a tight hug.

"Stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid! Tsukiko, how could you have been so stupid?!" she cried.

"K... Konoha?" Tsukiko stuttered, confused.

The fox's face grew red as a tomato. "To heck with atoning or granting wishes! Why didn't you tell me anything about this? Why did you keep it so secret and back yourself into this corner? You're the worst! I can't believe you'd betray me like this!"

The color drained from Tsukiko's face. "N-no... I didn't..."

"Yes, you did!" Konoha shouted. "You suffered alone and kept it all hidden

from me. You kept this secret even though I told you everything that I had on my mind. That's not what friends should do!"

Tsukiko gulped. Konoha's voice had gone hoarse, and she stared at her pale friend, but her voice suddenly turned gentle.

"You know, I actually quite like my ear like this," she said.

"What...?"

The fox touched the scar on her ear, shaking the satin ribbon she wore on it. "It reminds me of how I never gave up, after all. Yes, it hurt, and yes, it did make me pretty sad to see it in the mirror for a while...but none of that matters now, because I became best friends with you."

"No... No..." Tsukiko said, shaking her head, but Konoha continued to look at her with kind eyes. They were soft, without a trace of her earlier anger.

"Of course I'd like for my wishes to come true, but that's something I'd like to work on for myself. Having someone else grant them for me wouldn't make me truly happy, even if you were the one granting them. So please, don't do this anymore."

"But...if your wishes don't come true, then you'll be hurt. And if you're hurt, then you'll stop smiling..."

"And that's okay," Konoha assured her. "That's just how life is. It's going to be good sometimes and bad at other times. But, you know, I'm prepared to face all the pain and bitterness that comes with it and brave any storm along the way!"

She buried her face in Tsukiko's neck and whispered, "Of course, there are times when things hurt so much that I find it difficult to keep going, like when I get into fights with my father. But when that does happen, will you lend me a shoulder to lean on? There are just some things that only friends will get, right?"

"K-Konoha..."

"So...you don't have to try and grant my wishes anymore. Okay?"

"Kono...ha... Waaaaaaaahhh..." As Tsukiko started to cry, Konoha began rubbing her back.

“What shall we do about Yoruhito-san?” Konoha whispered sadly. “I was so convinced that we were soulmates, but it was all because of magic after all... No wonder he took the news of me being a fox so well... Ah ha ha...”

Her shoulders slumped and she frowned, not knowing what to make of the situation. And who could blame her for being crushed to learn that her supposed fairy tale love was all a lie?

It didn’t last long, however, because she looked over at Hakuzosu and the rest of us and smiled.

“Ah... Oh well! Things will eventually work out. Hey, Tsukiko, do you think I could make Yoruhito-san fall for me without any magic this time?”

Tsukiko beamed as she blinked the tears from her eyes. “Yeah, of course. You’re the most beautiful girl in the world, after all!”

“Hee hee! Yay! If you say so, then I know it’s true!”

The two broke into peals of joyful laughter, their faces messy and makeup running everywhere from their sobbing. But even so, their smiles were brighter and more beautiful than anything.

“I love you, Tsukiko. I want to be friends with you forever.”

“M-me too, Konoha. I love you too!”

It was safe to say now that neither of them would end up like Gon or Hyoju.

What made *Gon, the Little Fox* unique was that it lacked a tidy conclusion. The story ends as Gon lay dying, leaving his and Hyoju’s ultimate fate to the reader’s imagination. Perhaps that was why it was so widely used as a teaching tool in Japan.

Which made me wonder what would become of Konoha and Tsukiko now. One thing was for certain, though: No matter what happened, the two of them would inspire a story overflowing with kindness like no other.

I exhaled another sigh of relief, and it looked like I wasn’t the only one. But then, an oddly upbeat voice shattered the air.

“My oh my, that conversation sure took a weird turn, huh? We can’t have that!”

It was the mermaid butcher. He was scratching his head like he had grown tired of waiting.

“But I get what’s going on now. Have no fear, for I shall save you with my mermaid meat!” he grinned.

## Epilogue:

### Confession under a Morning Moon

“HEY, WAIT A MINUTE!” I rushed to stop the mermaid butcher. “Didn’t you hear any of what just happened?”

He cocked his head, genuinely confused. “Well, yeah, and it sounds like none of the problems we started with have been solved. So this is the perfect time for me to lend a helping hand!”

We all looked skeptically at one another. However, it wasn’t as if he were wrong: Konoha’s romantic situation was still stuck at an impasse, and none of her wishes had been granted.

“I can make any wish come true, you know,” the mermaid butcher said cheerily. “I could erase Hakuzosu’s hatred for humans, turn the fox girl’s boyfriend into a spirit, and even heal her ear!” His green eyes shone with an eerie light, and his grin grew wider as he continued.

“And as a bonus, you get to be immortal! It’s a great offer that you wouldn’t want to miss. Now, help me help you!”

*Oh, I can’t stand this guy!*

That was the last straw. I stormed up to him and bellowed, “It’s actually not as great as you make it out to be. All you’re offering is a bandage, not a real solution!”

“You really think so?” he said, puzzled.

“You’re right, our problems haven’t been solved yet. And yes, maybe using the mermaid meat could satisfy us for the moment, but we’ll eventually regret deciding to live an eternal life. Immortality isn’t something we can just choose on a whim!” I said firmly.

“Oh, is that it?” the butcher shrugged, as if my words had just entered one ear and gone out the other. He smiled, his face the image of perfect, pure innocence. “That’s nothing compared to the everlasting life you’ll get in

exchange.”

He raised the mermaid in his hand up to his face and fixated his gaze on its silver scales. “Your injuries may hurt when they’re fresh, but there’s no wound that can’t be healed with enough time. Whatever your worries may be, they’ll all eventually be smoothed out, and you won’t care so much about them anymore. At the end of eternity, you’ll find yourself filled with pure, untainted bliss. So, don’t worry and take this mermaid meat! Let me save you, and come live in immortality with me!”

I felt goosebumps run all over my arms. I didn’t understand how he could so cheerfully offer something that drastically changed mortals into immortals, but even if I couldn’t comprehend it, I could see that his actions and words were filled with kindness and authentic concern, like a good friend reaching out a helping hand. He was simple and straightforward in his good intentions, and that made him all the more terrifying.

But I couldn’t let my fear stop me. Konoha and Tsukiko had already done their part by opening up to each other, and now it was my turn to do what I could.

“No, you’re wrong!” I said to the mermaid butcher. I stood in front of Konoha and Tsukiko and opened my arms widely, trying to protect them. “Using the mermaid meat won’t solve anything. We don’t get many chances in life to make our own happy endings, and yet you want to take that away from us by making us rely on mermaid meat instead? Life may try to knock us down over and over, but that doesn’t mean all hope is lost, because we’ll still have hundreds and thousands of other paths we can take. That’s just what it means to live! If you want to make them eat mermaid meat, you’ll have to get through me first. I’m going to do everything I can to protect them because they’re my friends!”

“Kaori...”

“Konoha, you stay with Tsukiko and Hakuzosu,” I said and turned to the older fox. “You’ll protect your daughter, right?”

“O-oh, yeah, of course,” he nodded.

I nodded back and glared again at the mermaid butcher.

“You wanna do anything to these two, you’re gonna need to get past me!” I

shouted. I knew there wasn't much I could do, but I'd come all this way with the mission of protecting my friends in mind. As if I was going to let anyone—or anything—get in my way!

But suddenly, the mermaid butcher took on a completely different demeanor. The corners of his eyebrows raised in anger, and he drew his lips into a tight line. He looked like he was trying to pierce through me with his furious, bloodshot stare.

“What’s your problem? Why are you trying to stop me from saving people?!”

I gulped. This new mermaid butcher was very intimidating. His face had turned a splotchy red, like that of a child throwing a tantrum.

“All I want to do is give those in need a helping hand!” he screamed. “Stay out of my way!”

The mermaid in his hand abruptly began to squirm and twist about.

“SKREEEEEEEEEE!!!” it shrieked, its grotesque cry clashing with its young, baby-like face. It freed itself from the hook and began to zip through the air like it was swimming in water, its speed increasing with each second. As it closed in on me, it opened its mouth to reveal a set of disturbingly sharp teeth.

My breath stopped, and my legs froze from fear. None of my muscles would move.

But then came a voice that I had been yearning to hear for the past few days.

“Kaori! Use your letters!”

I snapped back to my senses and flung my bag open, reaching in to grab a handful of his precious writing and casting it to the sky with my prayers.

“Go!” I shouted.

The paper cranes all took off at once, clustering before the mermaid’s face. The creature floundered in annoyance and swerved away.

“I... I think that worked...” I sighed and slumped to the ground. Then, a familiar figure came into sight.

“Jeez, you really can’t keep yourself out of trouble, can you?”

“S-Suimei...!” I gasped. The moment I saw him, I felt my entire body give out. My vision grew wet and blurry, and I began to drag myself toward him on all fours, finally wrapping my arms around his leg.

“I-I thought I was going to die...!” I wailed.

“Let go, it’s not over yet!” he said grumpily.

I knew this was going to make him angry at me for a very long time afterward, but my body just wouldn’t move.

“I-I’m too scared. I can’t move... I just want to stay here with you...” I groaned, accidentally saying what I was thinking out loud. Suimei sighed loudly from the back of his throat. I snuck a glance up at him and saw that he was running a rough hand through his hair, blushing.

“Ugh, I just can’t with you,” he pouted.

The mermaid twisted back to chase us again. Suimei glared at it and shouted, “Kuro! Now’s the time to put your training to the test!”

“Yaaay! It’s my turn nooow!” the Inugami yapped as he bolted in a black flash. He leaped at the mermaid and gave his tail a big swing.

“Take this!” he yelled and blew the mermaid away with a huge shock wave.

“Hey there, little fishy! Welcome!” said another voice.

“Would you like to be fried or stewed? Ooh, sashimi could be good too!”

It was the Tengu twins, Kinme and Ginme, Kuro had landed the mermaid straight into the net they were holding, and they had caught it perfectly.

“Yay! We got a mermaaaid!” they cheered.

“Wha... Hey! Don’t you dare lay a single finger on my mermaid!” the mermaid butcher growled angrily. “You can’t just go around stealing other people’s things like that! If you want some mermaid meat, then at least have the courtesy to show me some despair and put me in the mood to save you!”

He stomped on the ground, frustrated. The shadow beneath him bubbled, and out popped a few more mermaids.

“Eek!” I squealed. I still couldn’t get over how freaky they looked, but nothing



was more exciting to Kuro and the twins than seeing new prey appear before them. Their eyes sparkled as they rushed toward the shadow.

“Whooooooo! The hunt is on, baby! Let’s see who can catch the most mermaids!” Ginme whooped.

“Hey! So unfair of you to give yourself a head start like that!” Kinme shouted back.

“I wanna play too!” Kuro yelped.

Seeing the three predators closing in on them, the mermaids readied themselves for battle. Suimei had mentioned something about training, and even a complete amateur like me could see how much faster and more refined Kuro and the twins’ movements had become.

The mermaid butcher clicked his tongue, realizing that he was at a clear disadvantage. He raised his foot, ready to summon more mermaids, but then...

“Hold on, young man. I think you’re going a little too far.”

“You could say that again! As long as we’re still here, we’re not just going to stand by and let you wreak havoc like this.”

The mermaid butcher found himself with a long pipe and sharp claws being pointed at his throat.

“Shibaemon-san! Noname!” I cried.

The two flashed me a grin. Shibaemon-tanuki then looked over at Tsukiko, who was pressed up against Konoha, and frowned apologetically.

“I’m so sorry that I didn’t see how much you were suffering, Tsukiko. I really can’t blame your mother for leaving me when I’m like this. Will you tell me more about how you’re feeling after this is all over? I’m a rotten excuse for a dad, but that’s the least I can do.”

“Father...” the girl whispered.

“Forgive me for being so useless,” Shibaemon-tanuki said.

Tsukiko’s eyes began to well with tears again, and Shibaemon-tanuki scratched at his head bashfully.

“That’s enooough!” the mermaid butcher shouted, unable to restrain himself any longer. “Is my goodwill just a joke to you?!”

“Goodwill?” drawled a voice with a sneer of bitter disregard. “How do you sleep at night knowing you’re capable of such stupidity? You couldn’t even make it as the comic relief in a story.”

“Tamaki-san!” I gasped.

The man’s lips curled with disgust as he glared daggers at the mermaid butcher. “So you’re the idiot who’s been running around with mermaid meat, huh?”

The butcher scrunched his face, offended by the rudeness. “And who are you? Have we met somewhere before?”

“Ha!” Tamaki-san scoffed with undisguised revulsion. “You don’t recognize me, huh? It’s really incredible just how unpleasant you are.”

He drew his face close to the butcher’s until they were almost touching. “I used to be an artist, but now I’m only a sorry man who’s had this unwanted immortality forced onto me. My life was ruined because you had to shove your so-called goodwill onto people with no regard for who was on the receiving end.”

The mermaid butcher blinked. “Ohhh... You’re a fellow brother who’s also received the gift of eternity!” His expression immediately softened. “An artist, huh? Then you must be in heaven without the shackles of mortality holding you back! I can’t imagine anything happier than having all the time in the world to immerse yourself in your craft!” he continued with genuine delight.

The insensitive remark must have struck a nerve with Tamaki-san. He tried to swallow back his rage, but something in his eyes snapped. “You can shove your happiness up your ass!” he roared, loud enough to make anyone’s eardrums hurt, and the mermaid butcher jumped. “There’s no heaven to be found in eternity...only hell.”

“Huh...? Wh-what do you mean?” the butcher asked.

“I put my heart and soul into all of my illustrations. I loved my craft. I admit I started it because I wanted the fame, but my goals changed the longer I

pursued it.”

Tears began to fall from Tamaki-san’s eyes. “I don’t need to live forever. There’s no point in it when I can’t share it with my wife. We promised we’d be together in our next life, so she’s still waiting for me. I need to die as soon as I can.”

His head drooped as though his strength had evaporated, and he clutched his chest in agony. “Tell me how I can get rid of my immortality. Please, just let me die...”

Hearing Tamaki-san’s desperate and heartfelt plea, the mermaid butcher’s face wrinkled in irritation. “Why would you say something so sad like that when you have the gift of eternal life? You make it sound like I’m the bad guy for doing what I do.”

He looked at the ground with his brows furrowed like a child about to cry. “Eternity is salvation. I’m a savior who grants everyone’s wishes... I know what I do is right!”

There was a sound like a big splash of water, and just like that, he vanished.

“Wha...?!” I gasped and hurriedly scanned my surroundings, but he was nowhere to be seen. Even the mermaids that the twins and Kuro had been fending off were gone. All that remained was a puddle where the butcher had stood. He must have used a shadow to escape in the same way that he’d arrived.

“You’ve... You’ve gotta be kidding me,” muttered the stunned Tamaki-san. He fell to his knees.

“AAAHHHHHH!!!” he screamed. No longer able to contain his frustration, he hammered the ground with his fist. He brought it down again and again and again, until blood began to leak from his broken skin. There was nothing any of us could do to stop him.

However, someone did try to speak to him in that state.

“It has been a while since we last met, hasn’t it, Tamaki? Have you been well?” Tamamo-no-Mae said as if everything were perfectly ordinary.

“Leave me alone. I’m not in the mood for this,” Tamaki-san answered without looking up.

It didn’t matter to the most wicked woman history had ever seen, though. “Ho ho ho!” she chuckled. “Are you sure you want me to leave you alone? I do recall that when you drew my portrait, I promised you that I would grant any wish you wanted. I only figured it was time for me to fulfill that vow.”

“What...?” Now, Tamaki-san looked up, his face wet.

“I believe *that* would suffice,” she said, pointing past him with her fan at the net Ginme held in his hat.

There was a single mermaid trapped in it.

“Mermaid meat is capable of granting any wish, is it not? So you should be able to wish for your immortality to be undone,” the fox said.

Tamaki-san’s eyes flew open in amazement. He was so astonished that he fell backward.

“Oh my gosh!” I shouted and dove at him. He accepted my joyous hug without any question and let the big, round moon above bathe him in its light.

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It was late, far into the early hours of the next day, but we had no time to waste. Immediately after everything with Tsukiko had been wrapped up, we headed straight for the spirit realm’s resting spot for souls without even pausing to collect ourselves.

We were now in the old-fashioned zashiki prison that sat underwater, surrounding the island in the lake. The sound of our footsteps echoed through the halls as we walked. We were exhausted, but Oyuki-san could disappear at any moment, and that was the one risk we didn’t want to take.

The place was crammed full of souls, perhaps because the human world hadn’t been doing too well recently. I watched the nuns rush back and forth as they performed their duties, occasionally darting a glance at Tamaki-san, who looked to be deep in thought.

“They’ve still got all the staff here run ragged like usual, huh?” he

commented.

“Well, what do you want them to do? It’s the same as any waiting room in a human hospital.”

Shinonome-san and the kappa, Toochika-san, were walking beside him. They had both been friends with Tamaki-san for a very long time, so they had rushed here in the dead of night to stay with him in his last moments.

Yes, it was finally time for the story-seller to close the book on the life that had been extended against his will, in order to join his wife in their new future together.

He was going to die today.

I felt my mind swirl like a storm with that thought hanging over me, and I thought about the cicada siblings from a while ago. This wasn’t going to be my first time seeing someone I knew die, but no matter how many times I went through this experience, I was never going to get used to it. Especially if it would be Tamaki-san. We had shared so many conversations, jokes, and moments of laughter. Out of all the people I had seen pass away, he was the one I felt closest to.

I must have been looking quite troubled, because Suimei suddenly asked, “Are you all right?”

I didn’t have the strength to answer, though, with the painful lump forming in my throat. Even with my mouth closed, I felt like I could burst into tears at any moment. I just gave him a tiny shake of my head in reply. Seeing me like this, Suimei frowned and tightly curled his hand around mine.

We walked in silence for a few more minutes until we finally arrived at our destination, the zashiki prison that sat in the middle of the lake. What set it apart from other rooms was that instead of a ceiling, you could see the water stirring above your head, with the occasional shadow of a large fish crossing it. The room was illuminated by paper lanterns filled with glimmerflies, and the atmosphere was peaceful even though it was a place of confinement.

“Finally, you’re all here. I’ve grown tired of waiting for so long,” Tamamo-no-Mae moaned from the entrance.

“Welcome. We’ve already had a bit of a chat,” Noname said from beside the fox with a smile on her face. They were both sitting in front of the cell, and it seemed like they had been deep in conversation with its occupant before we arrived. Noname’s eyes and nose were pinkish, as if she had been crying. “It’s finally time for the husband to make his entrance, huh? I’m sure you’ve got a lot you want to say too. Come here!” she said, and the two spirits scooted over.

Tamaki-san said nothing. He simply stared at the figure who had left the cell, the pain in his heart visible on his face.

“My, that certainly took you a long while,” the figure said. She was an old woman with gentle eyes and a head of white hair that fell to her waist, which was neatly combed and tied back. The wrinkles on her face were telling of her age, like the rings in a tree trunk. She was Oyuki-san, wife of Tamaki-san.

She cast a shy glance down at the kimono she was wearing and giggled, her face relaxing. “When I heard that you were coming, I asked Hakutaku-sama to prepare a new kimono for me. Although I must say that this pale yellow might look better on a young lady than an old one like me.”

Tamaki-san approached Oyuki-san with loving adoration creasing the corners of his eyes, and he reached out a hand to softly stroke his beloved’s face.

“Nonsense,” he said with a tenderness that I had never heard before. “You look wonderful. That shade brings out the color in your eyes splendidly.”

“Oh my!” Oyuki-san said, a rosy hue emerging in her cheeks. “Not here, in front of all these people! It looks like your appearance wasn’t the only thing that turned young.”

Tamaki-san’s words appeared to have been too bold for the sensibilities of a woman who lived during the Edo period, and she turned away sharply out of embarrassment. The story-seller chuckled lightly and wrapped his arms around his wife’s waist, pulling her close.

“Wh...” she gasped, flustered. “T-Toyofusa-sama!”

“It’s been two hundred years,” he said. “Times have changed, Oyuki. Now, it’s perfectly acceptable for me to say what I love about you for the whole world to see and hear.”

Oyuki-san squealed, her cheeks' rosiness changing quickly to a vibrant red as Tamaki-san continued to hold her tightly in his embrace.

"I'm really sorry to have kept you waiting for so long," he whispered, his voice trembling.

Oyuki-san twitched, and she shook her head. "That's quite all right. I've always known that the only thing you could do decently was draw."

"Ouch! Harsh," Tamaki-san said.

"Not when you think about how long I've been waiting," the woman chuckled.

"True," her husband sighed, and he turned to face the rest of us.

"Shinonome. Toochika. Can I ask you two to take care of this body after I'm gone? I'd like to have a funeral in the human world, if possible. I... I've been dodging death for so long purely because of an unfortunate turn of events, so I've never once thought of myself as a spirit. I've always just been a human, so I want to end as a human would."

"Of course," Shinonome-san nodded.

"We'll make sure you're taken care of," Toochika-san agreed.

Tamaki-san then looked over at Tamamo-no-Mae and gave her a small bow. "Please arrange with Enma for Oyuki and me to meet in our next lives. I don't think even he could turn you down."

"Ho ho ho!" the fox chuckled. "I know. Now don't lay it on so thick, or you'll smother my motivation."

"...I'll leave it to you, then," Tamaki-san said. Then he faced his oldest friend, Noname. Her face was still red and swollen from crying.

"I'd love to draw your jaki-e again," he said.

"And you're welcome to," she said. "I'll always be waiting for your return."

Finally, he looked at me and smiled. "Oyuki and I were never able to have children, so...I guess sometimes I saw you as my daughter. Sorry if I was ever too overbearing."

"O-oh, no, it's fine!" I stammered.

“You really are one of the luckiest people I’ve ever met, in terms of the people who come into your life,” Tamaki-san said. “Remember that. I wish you happiness, Kaori. You deserve it more than anyone.”

I tried to say something back, but the air was stuck in my throat. My tears flowed silently down my cheeks, and I nodded.

Tamaki-san exhaled and focused back on Oyuki-san. “Just so you know, I haven’t been able to draw anything properly in an extremely long time. I don’t even know if I’ll be able to wield a brush well in my next life,” he said apprehensively.

“Oh my. Don’t worry,” Oyuki-san giggled. “I’ll be there to whip you into shape.”

“You’re as strict as ever, but that’s what makes so you kind,” he smiled.

“But of course. I’m wed to an artist great enough to leave his name in history, after all,” she said.

“Ah ha ha! That is true. Jeez, I really would be nothing without you,” he laughed. “Hey, before I eat the mermaid meat, can we just talk for a little while? So much has happened today, and I also have more than a few decades’ worth of feelings I want to share. Now I can tell you how pretty you are all I want and shower upon you all the love I left unsaid, which I could have never done in the olden days.”

“Do be gentle. I fear my heart may stop otherwise.”

“We wouldn’t want that, now would we?”

Tamaki-san and Oyuki-san linked hands and began to talk in low whispers, becoming completely wrapped up in their own little world. We turned away to leave them in their moment, with Shinonome-san sniffing as we departed.

Toochika-san patted him gently on the back and said, “He’ll be back soon enough when he’s reincarnated. We just need to wait for him.”

“You’re right,” Shinonome-san said, and he walked farther away with the rest of the party. I found myself unable to hold back my tears anymore. As the drops fell one after another, I tried to catch up, but my steps were slow.



Suddenly, Suimei, who was walking beside me, pulled my hand.

“Can we go somewhere to talk?” he asked with a serious expression in his eyes. Without thinking much, I nodded. And as I did, I caught the fond murmurs of warm love from behind me.

“I can’t believe I was lucky enough to meet someone like you. I love you so much. You’re the only one for me, so please stay with me forever.”

“I’d be more than willing to. Wherever you are, no matter how high or low, I’ll be right there beside you.”

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Suimei took me back to Awaji Island before the day broke. The inky sea filled the air with the sound of its waves, and I felt a sense of unease watching it, as if I could be swallowed up at any moment, never to return...

However, maybe that was what I needed in this moment. As I stared from my seat atop the breakwater, I could feel my turbulent feelings being sapped into the murky abyss. My heart had been heavy with anguish, but as I let the salted wind blow against my skin, it began to dissipate bit by bit.

“Do you feel any better?” Suimei asked as he approached and sat down beside me. He handed me a warm can of coffee and gave me a rueful smile. “Why do these kinds of things always happen with you?”

“It’s not my fault,” I sighed. “Though the thing with Tamaki-san did...hit a little hard.” Even now, as I remembered it, I felt the tears beginning to prickle again.

“I just want Tamaki-san and Oyuki-san to be happier than they’ve ever been in their next life, but I probably won’t be able to see them by then, right? I just feel like I had to say goodbye to them way too suddenly,” I sniffled, trying to focus on the warmth of the can against my fingers instead.

Suimei knitted his brows. He was clearly feeling mixed emotions too. “Well, there’s not much we can do about that. We’re only human, after all, unlike the rest of the bunch,” he said.

“Yeah, I know, but...it still makes me sad.”

“Me too,” Suimei whispered.

We let the rhythmic lapping of the water lull us for a moment, and then Suimei spoke again. “Bet you forgot that we haven’t seen each other in ages, huh?”

“Oh!” I gasped and looked at him in a panic. He seemed to be looking back at me in slight disappointment.

“Um, well, you know, that’s ‘cause...”

*I was preoccupied with the whole Tamaki-san thing!*

I stammered all over myself, trying to reason with Suimei. He coughed out a laugh after struggling to hold it back and turned away to let himself laugh the rest of it out.

I didn’t know what to do, so I just apologized. “I’m sorry. I didn’t forget or anything, I promise.”

“I know, I know. I was just teasing,” Suimei said, straightening himself. “I’m just sorry that I couldn’t give you my answer earlier.”

My heart leapt. I felt myself grow hot, like a fire had been lit inside of me. Had my heart always been this noisy? And when did I start sweating? Suimei’s gaze was too much for me to handle right now, and part of me started to wish I could run away.

“Guess why I brought you back to Awaji Island?” he said. The question caught me off guard, and I tilted my head. Sensing that I was stuck for an answer, he turned to the wide expanse before us.

“While you guys were talking with Konoha, I had a bit of a chat with Tamaki,” he said.

“With Tamaki-san? About what?” I asked.

“He told me how, according to the *Kojiki*, this island was the first in the Japanese archipelago to be created,” he said softly as he faced me again with gentle eyes. “This is where the life, traditions, and stories of our country first began. When he said that, the first thing I thought about was you.”

All of a sudden, the corner of my vision was flooded with light. I jumped, and my eyes darted to see what it was. A line of scarlet red began to spread from

the horizon. It was the sun, welcoming the new day. The dark sky filled with color, and the sea turned from obsidian to a blanket of glittering jewels.

While I was spellbound by the scene before me, my hand touched Suimei's. The sudden contact surprised me, and I turned to look at him. His eyes were slowly being dyed with the brilliance of the morning sun, their light brown melting into a shimmering gold. I blinked, mesmerized.

"My story began when I fell into the spirit world. If you hadn't picked me up off the floor back then, none of this would have been written." He gripped my hand tightly. "I used to push my emotions deep down, and I knew so little of the world and could barely find my way around it, but you changed me. And for that, I'll be forever grateful."

Suimei took a deep breath to recollect himself, then exhaled. When he looked into my eyes again, he was full of determination.

"I love you too," he said, a small smile playing at the corners of his eyes.

"O-oh... Oh...!" I fumbled. My heart was thumping so fast that it felt like an earthquake had struck inside of me. All the fibers of my being somehow started to feel jittery. Suimei's embarrassment was evident on his face too. His blushing made him look adorable.

I gave into my emotions and shouted, "*Suimei!!!*"

"Wh-what?" he jumped.

"Put your arms out!!!"

"O-okay!" he said, and he did so without any further question.

I dove right into his arms with all the strength I could muster and yelled, "I'm so happy! I love you too!"

"Whoa!" Suimei yelled, and then there was a *thud*. His face scrunched up in pain. I had rushed at him with such force that his head was flung back into the breakwater.

"Aaaaaahhh!" I wailed in panic. "Suimei! Are you okay?!"

"You..." he muttered.

“Noooooooo!!! Nooo, what do I dooo?! I don’t want my boyfriend to die from a brain hemorrhage right after we find out that we like each other! Noname! Nonaaame!” I screamed. “Wait, we’re in the human world. Hey, you got health insurance?!”

“Calm down, you idiot,” he said and gently smacked me, knocking me back to my senses. I looked down with watery eyes at Suimei, who was squashed between me and the concrete, and he suddenly burst into laughter.

“Ah ha ha ha ha! Man, there’s never a dull moment with you, huh?”

I sighed and slumped into myself as I watched him lose his composure. I was supposed to be the older one, and yet here I was, being so silly and immature! I deflated like a balloon and flopped onto Suimei, my head resting on his chest. From my new angle, I could see the faint trace of the moon, emanating a soft light in the hazy sky.

*The moon is so beautiful in the morning,* I thought. As I watched it floating alone in the void, I began to feel a little melancholy myself.

While I was distracted, Suimei began to speak. “I’ve been thinking a lot recently about how spirits live in the night, but humans like us live in a world filled with sunlight. No matter how much time we spend living with each other, there will still be times where we mix just as well as oil and water.”

“Yeah...” I mumbled.

*That’s true... In that sense, I’m kind of like the morning moon, huh?* I thought. *Drifting alone between the worlds of night and day, not really belonging to either. Left behind like the moon in the morning sky.*

“It’s kind of sad,” I continued. “And it’s...really suffocating too.”

“But even so, we chose to live in the spirit world, right?” Suimei replied.

“...Yeah. Yeah, we did.”

Everything that was precious to me was in the spirit world: my adoptive father, my mother figure, my childhood friends, friends I made later in life, even the acquaintances who sometimes caused trouble for me. They’d all helped form the memories I held dear to my heart, ever since I could remember.

They were all open-minded and generous spirits who even helped send a friend off to his next life. I'm sure that, if I wished for it, Shinonome-san and everyone else would help set me up in the human world too. However, I had no desire to live there. I would always prefer the spirit world, with all its mystery and beauty, and everything that made it different from somewhere a human would usually live.

"I love the spirit world and all the spirits who live there," I said. "It doesn't matter if I'm not the same as them—it's still my home."

I raised my hand to the sky, moving it like I was trying to stroke the morning moon. Then Suimei took it in his.

"Yeah, me too. The spirit world feels like home to me as well," he said. "No, wait. That's not quite right."

He smiled peacefully at me and traced a soft fingertip against my palm. "I feel like...home is wherever you are, Kaori. So tell me whenever you're having a hard time, okay?"

"Huh...?" I gasped and looked at him. Suimei was gazing at the moon with love in his eyes.

"You don't have to suffer alone. Whatever it is, there's nothing the two of us can't handle together," he said. Then, his next words reminded me of what Shinonome-san had told me when I was a child.

"We'll be okay if we're together. You have me. You'll always have me." His words were filled with kindness and strength, wrapping around me like a firm hug.

"Suimei..." I whispered. As the sentiment swam around in my head, I could feel my heart growing full, taking in something soft yet with a fiery warmth at the same time. It grew and grew until there was no more space for the doubts, sadness, and loneliness I'd been feeling before. They had all been transformed into tenderness.

"Me too. You'll always have me too," I said. Now the warmth had completely enveloped me, and I realized that I wanted to devote my heart to him as long as it was still beating. There was really no one else like him in any world. Just

thinking about him made me happier than anything, but that was also a little embarrassing to admit, and it made my heart want to run laps around the world too.

*Aaagh, I can't deal with this! I like him so, so much!*

I grabbed Suimei's cheeks in both hands and pulled him toward me.

"Hee hee... I love you!" I giggled and pushed my face to his.

*Thunk.*

My vision burst with a fizz of static as our foreheads clashed. *Great job on ruining the perfect moment for a kiss, me!*

"Ow, ow, ow..." I winced tearfully. I noticed that Suimei had turned bright red, and his eyes were watering too.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry!" I apologized, rubbing my neck. "I really messed..."

"KAORI!" He yelled. "C'mon, now!!!"

My eyes widened at his outburst, but it's not like I could exactly blame him for getting mad at how badly I had just bungled the mood with my attempt at our first kiss.

I shuddered with dread. *I'm never going to live this down, am I...?*

"Um... Oopsie...?" I tried to laugh it off. It was all I could do, really.

"You leave me with no choice," Suimei huffed. "Sit up straight. Now. And listen to me."

"Eek!" I squeaked and straightened my back.

"I thought about this when you confessed to me too, but you leap before you look way too much! That's how you get yourself in trouble so often. Get that into your head!" he said.

"Eeeeeek..." I quivered with trembling lips, pleading with my eyes, but he had no intention of going easy on me.

"This is a lesson you need to learn once and for all! I hope you're ready for this!" he declared and pointed an intimidating finger at me.

I shrank in on myself. My first love and my first confession were imploding, and there was no one to blame but me. Mostly, anyway.

“Jeez, you’re so...so... Why are you like this, Kaori?!”

“I-I’m sorryyyyyy!!!”

And thus, the rest of the morning on Awaji Island was filled with the sound of Suimei’s lecture.

## Extra Story: A Hidden Secret

**“W**E’LL BURY HIM tomorrow. You must be exhausted after everything today. Go get some rest.”

Shinonome bade farewell to Toochika by the shop entrance, then dragged his weary body inside the bookstore. It was quiet and completely empty; Kaori had not returned home yet.

“Where is that silly daughter of mine?” Shinonome muttered as he entered the living room. He reached for his tobacco, wanting to smoke before he retired for the day, but stopped as a sharp pain shot through him.

“Grgh!” He stumbled and knocked his pipe to the floor, where it rolled on the tatami. The pain only worsened and spread further, like it was trying to rip his body apart, hindering even his breathing.

“Agh... Gck...!” he heaved as he slid a hand into his kimono to pull out a pillbox. He shook its contents onto a shuddering palm and threw them into his mouth, chewing up the pills with his molars. Their horrid flavor invaded his taste buds, and he winced

as he swallowed. Once his mouth was empty, he began to gasp for air, waiting for the medicine’s effects to take hold.

“Dammit...”

Usually, he would only have to wait for a few minutes, but strangely, he wasn’t feeling any better. His head rolled as his body gave out, and as he fell, his feet knocked over the tall brazier on the ground, spilling its ashes everywhere.

*Kaori.*

Shinonome tried to steady his breathing as he thought about his beloved daughter. He prayed that he could get himself back on his feet before she returned. He couldn’t let her see him like this. No way. When she walked



through the door, he wanted to be able to welcome her back like nothing had ever happened. In his opinion, that was his duty as a father.

*Tinkle.*

Suddenly, the chime of a bell broke the air. At first, he thought that Kaori was back, but he felt no presence in the house. He closed his eyes as he continued to sweat cold droplets, hoping the pain would fade.

It only grew more intense, however. He cursed himself, and then...an unfamiliar voice spoke in his ear.

“Hey, did you know that mermaid meat can grant you any wish you want?”

Shinonome could not answer, though, as the unbearable pain overtook him completely and he slipped into unconsciousness.

## Afterword

**H**ELLO. Shinobumaru here. Thank you so much for making it to the end of Volume 5 of *The Haunted Bookstore*.

This series has finally made it to its fifth installment! I even saw an ad for *The Haunted Bookstore* on TV the other day. It made me really happy to see, of course, but more than anything, I'm just glad that I've had the chance to keep writing for so long. It really is the best thing any author could ask for.

I've really been enjoying writing Tamaki-san as well. He's been popping up here and there since Volume 1, but this time he even made it to the back cover! I'm glad I was able to uncover some more of the mysteries of the apothecary too. Not to toot my own horn, but I think this series is shaping up to be full of depth.

I'd also like to offer my sincere thanks to all the people who made this publication possible.

To my editor, Sato: Thank you so much for all your help, as always! The end-of-year and New Year period was filled with enough stress to drive all of us crazy, but I'm so glad that we pulled through it all to get Volume 5 done. I don't think I could ever thank you enough for the support you've given me. I'm very excited to see what the future holds for us!

To Munashichi, our cover illustrator: Thank you for yet another stunning cover! I'm always blown away by how beautiful they are, but I think Volume 5's is even more breathtaking than usual. I'm just so in love with how perfectly the illustration captures my vision. I really love it so much... And I got so emotional seeing Tamaki-san on the back too. I really like him...

Finally, to all the sales staff, proofers, and reviewers at Micro Magazine, all bookstore employees, and everyone who helped deliver my stories to their readers: I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

We're finally approaching the climax of the story. I can't wait for you all to see what happens to Kaori as she continues her life in the spirit world as a human. You're probably all aware of this by now, but Shinonome will be our focus in the next installment. I'm very excited for you all to see how he navigates his suffering and his happy days. I know I'm the author and all, but just thinking about what will happen to him brings a tear to my eye. So keep your eyes peeled for the next volume!

From a spring night colored  
with fallen cherry blossoms,





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